

# NIHILISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

A Philosophical Dialogue with  
James Tartaglia

Edited by  
Masahiro Morioka

Journal of Philosophy of Life





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# Nihilism and the Meaning of Life

## A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia

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## Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers and essays published in the Special Issue “Nihilism and the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.7, No.1, 2017, pp.1-315. Two years ago, in 2015, we published the book *Reconsidering Meaning in Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with Thaddeus Metz*, and after the publication, one of the contributors to the above book, James Tartaglia, published his own intriguing philosophical book on the meaning of life and its connection with nihilism, entitled *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality* (Bloomsbury 2016). I thought it would be a good idea to have a symposium on his book in the *Journal of Philosophy of Life*.

I invited ten philosophers who have a strong interest in this topic, and edited a special volume dedicated to Tartaglia’s book. After receiving their papers, I asked James to write a reply to each of them, and in July this year we published a special issue in the *Journal*. You can read all of them, along with the replies by Tartaglia, in this single book.

Nihilism is an important topic in the field of philosophy of life. Currently, anti-natalism is hotly debated in the context of the meaning of/in life in analytic philosophy. The idea of anti-natalism goes back to ancient Greek literature and philosophy in Europe, and ancient Indian philosophy and religions in Asia. I believe that tackling the theme of nihilism will contribute a lot to contemporary philosophical discussions about the meaning of life and death in the contemporary world.

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July 31, 2017.

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# Nihilism and the Meaning of Life

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## 1. Introduction

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, I set out to reaffirm the question of the meaning of life in the face of outdated, positivistic instincts, the scientistic and anti-religious sentiment that pervades much of contemporary intellectual culture, and, in no small dose, I think, an existential discomfort that makes people reluctant to take up such questions. When I looked to recent discussions under the ‘meaning of life’ heading, I also felt the need to save the question from a group of contemporary value theorists who have tried to make it something it is not, and to show that the genuine article is just as interesting for non-believers as it is for those of faith. Prominent as this agenda became in the final product, however, it emerged from other aims.

When I began to study philosophy, I wanted to know what it *was* – what made a discussion or topic specifically *philosophical* – and was amazed at the evasion, disinterest and even scorn which this natural question typically elicits within the profession. It has been neglected just as much as the meaning of life, and I came to think this was no coincidence; for as I argue in the book, when philosophy turned away from the meaning of life, it turned away from its own unifying theme. This pushed philosophy to the margins of culture. For outside the discipline (inside as well, for the most part), nobody has much of a clue what philosophy is supposed to be; and the one question you would have thought would be prime philosophical territory is officially not – I cannot think of a better recipe for getting people to lose interest. When people are exposed to philosophy, however, it can elicit a passion that is the envy of other disciplines. This suggested to me that a lack of self-consciousness was preventing philosophy from fulfilling its proper role. I trace this lack of self-consciousness principally to a lack of self-confidence in the face of science.

Traditional works of philosophy, of the kind that still enthuse people about the subject, are typically wide-ranging, interconnected, squarely implicated with matters of natural interest, and aimed at a certain kind of systematic completeness of understanding; they are philosophy-like. The philosophy that predominates in the contemporary analytic tradition is piece-meal and fragmented; it is science-like. If the results of this work were to be pulled together into something of general interest, then you feel that, just as with science, this would have to be done in a popular book that abstracts from the difficulties to distil the interesting, take-home messages. I do not see this happening; and I am not sure that there are enough take-home messages around these days that people *would* find interesting. I worry that the interest is too often solely professional; and worse, that it is sometimes essentially professional, as competing ‘researchers’ vie to carve out their own distinctive niches in debates. All academics engage in the latter to some extent, of course, but in science, burying your head in whatever research programme is within reach can make a certain kind of scientific, rather than just professional, sense; for the visible, real-world effects of science are the collective result of lots of people doing just that. However this model strikes me as much less appropriate to philosophy, where the only visible, real-world effect is human understanding. Science provides us with technological solutions, as well as understanding which may or may not be of general interest; but philosophy produces only understanding.

This understanding should not be confined to the profession if, as I think, philosophy deals with issues of natural human interest. I am not saying that philosophers have a duty to reach out to the public; I would have written a very different book if that had been my main concern. Neither am I saying that the piece-meal approach is without merit; it instils discipline and responsiveness to peers, and much great philosophy has been produced this way. I am saying that since philosophy deals with issues of natural human interest, it should provide answers that cater to those interests; such that if people make the effort to understand what philosophers are saying, and they succeed, then they do not feel cheated.

If you believe that philosophy as a piece-meal, collective endeavour will ultimately provide better answers than the traditional approach did, and which can consequently be disseminated to satisfy natural philosophical

interests, then it may still seem good to you that the piece-meal approach has eclipsed the systematic one. But then you must have faith that the collation and dissemination will ultimately transpire, rather than be indefinitely deferred as debates inconclusively fizzle-out to be replaced by new ones. That is, you must have faith that ways of philosophically understanding the world, and thereby meeting the natural human interests which the discipline arose from – and is still sustained by – really are being produced in this way. Moreover, you must have faith that debates come to dominate journals because they represent the state-of-the-art culmination of a history of philosophical discussion; and that they do not leave behind, for forgotten reasons and happenstance, large swathes of thought which only historians of dead philosophers continue to write about, but which will almost inevitably resurface in tomorrow's leading debates.

Lacking this kind of faith, I set out to write a traditional philosophy book. In that way, I was able assure myself that I was doing my job; for I take a long-view of my job-description. The topic I wanted to build this book around was consciousness. Consciousness was the topic of my Ph.D., and of all the topics I have come across in contemporary debates, it is the one that has gripped me the most. Moreover, I knew that consciousness would lead me into the metaphysics of time, which sounded good for my traditional aspirations, and I had been persuaded by Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that there was a deep connection between modern concerns about consciousness and the ancient problem of universals. So far so good; but I still needed an account of consciousness, and more importantly, I still wanted to know what philosophy was.

For many years I struggled to formulate a physicalist account of consciousness that I could believe, for I was sure that physicalism *must be true*, even if, to echo Thomas Nagel, I found it incredibly difficult to see how it *could be true*. When my overarching concern about the nature of philosophical inquiry finally led me to ask why anyone would care, as I did so much, about how consciousness could be fitted into a physical world, I finally arrived at the question of the meaning of life. (For some days, a passage by Heidegger about science had been stuck in my head, like a song; then it just 'clicked'.) From that point onwards, all the pieces began to fall into place. I soon rejected physicalism, and am now as thoroughly anti-physicalist as the proverbial ex-smoker is anti-cigarettes. This allowed

me to write my book; which panned out as follows.

## 2. Synopsis

In the introduction, I begin by tackling the popular notion that the question of the meaning of life is hopelessly obscure. It is in fact perfectly straightforward, but in an intellectual culture dominated by science, and displaying strong anti-philosophical tendencies, the ‘what does it even mean, anyway?’-idea has provided an easy way of dismissing what is perhaps the most potent philosophical question of all. Another popular avoidance strategy is to interpret the question, however tenuously, as a question about the social meaning which we build up within our lives. I argue that this conflation stems from 19<sup>th</sup> century overreactions to the prospect of nihilism which sprang from the false assumption that nihilism is *bad*. But only a meaning of life could be bad, not the lack of one.

The introduction ends with an appendix, in which I launch into a polemic against the contemporary analytic approach to social meaning; an approach which either dismisses, or tries to pass itself off as, inquiry into the meaning of life. I regret the tone I took here, partly because it may overshadow what I think are some good arguments against the main theories in the field, but mainly because the philosophers I attack revived interest in this crucial area, for which they should be congratulated; I made the latter point in the book, but a little too reluctantly. The only excuse I can offer is the rather pathetic one that I had been reading a lot of this stuff at the time, and some of it, especially the examples adversely comparing ordinary people with the great and the good, in terms of how meaningful their lives were deemed to be, had annoyed me. But I wrote with no malice, either here or in other pieces of the time, but rather with an excess of enthusiasm inspired by having seen my book to completion, or knowing that I soon would; anyone who knows me would have no doubt about the truth of this. My views have not changed or softened; in fact I have now seen even more fundamental problems with the social meaning agenda (Tartaglia 2016a). But in making my critique, I should have thought less about honesty and providing a good read, and more about courtesy and diplomacy. Since I targeted leading figures, I trust this was water off a duck’s back; I am sure it would have been, because great experience instils

wisdom of the kind I am still learning. But if I did offend anybody, then I sincerely and publicly apologise.

In chapter one, which survived relatively unscathed from my first draft for over a decade, I claim that human life is meaningless, but does not normally seem like that because our social understanding of the world focuses our attention on goals; we normally have ‘something to do’. Nevertheless nihilism ticks away in the background and reveals itself through our susceptibility to boredom, which arises when our engagement with the social framework subsides; we find ourselves with ‘nothing to do’. After criticising Heidegger’s existentialist analyses of both boredom and anxiety, on the grounds that they are rooted in a misguided redemptive agenda (always a danger for creative philosophers, I think), I connect the question of the meaning of life to another of the great issues of natural philosophical curiosity: the cosmological question of why there is something rather than nothing. The connection is that life and the fact of existence are both things we naturally expect to be able to make a certain kind of sense of, but find that we cannot. In understanding that we cannot, I think we can satisfy the curiosity behind this question. The chapter concludes with a critique of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism, which is much more loaded than mine is.

In chapter two, I look at the various intellectual defence mechanisms which 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers devised to deal with nihilism; the prospect of the truth of nihilism has evidently struck terror into many hearts. But there was no need for protection, consolation, or resignation, since nihilism is neither a threat nor a challenge; it only comes to seem that way because of inherited prejudice and intellectual error. Thus some have argued that nihilism renders life absurd; but such views only make sense within a religious perspective that the nihilist rejects. So nihilists should not be absurdists. Others try to avoid nihilism by defending the humanist view that people make their own meaning. Now people obviously do make their own meaning, but social meaning is a different issue: for there to be a meaning of life would require a transcendent context of meaning of the kind supplied by religions, and since humanists agree with me that there is no good reason to believe in one, they should accept the inevitable result, namely nihilism. A radical form of humanism is relativistic scepticism about objective truth, of the kind promoted by ‘postmodernists’ (an

entrenched and useful label, which most of the thinkers in question try in vain to disavow). But this can be discounted for obvious reasons; people can decide to uncover as many objective truths about the world as they like. I find the circumstances in which these radical, and radically implausible, views came to prominence, far more interesting than the views themselves. For they were yet another unnecessary response to nihilism: if nothing is true, so went the underlying thought, then nihilism cannot be either.

In chapter three, I turned to my overriding concern: achieving philosophical self-consciousness by answering the question of what philosophy is. I have since produced a neater, more journal-friendly version of this chapter's core theory about the unity of philosophy (Tartaglia 2016b); but the position itself did not change. However, I am not particularly happy with how, within the book chapter, I subsequently went on to use this position to answer scepticism about philosophy. What I say is along the right lines, but the ideas had not been properly developed at the time. More importantly, I had not yet seen their importance; I was primarily thinking of philosophy-scepticism as a dumb and annoying meme which philosophers had taken too seriously. But I now see that it is much more than that.

I begin the chapter by supporting my view that the question of the meaning of life is a natural philosophical concern by discussing the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, thereby taking us right back to the beginning of human literature. I was blown away, on first reading this work, when I discovered that its dominant theme is the meaning of life. Although I was nervous about treading into scholarly waters of which I know very little, I simply had to include it; for although some of my speculations about its intentions may be miles off, despite my best efforts, my central point – namely that the authors were thinking about the meaning of life – is something I would be very surprised to be dissuaded of.

I go on to observe that although the question of the meaning of life is paradigmatically philosophical, the same can be said about the traditional questions of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. To understand philosophy, as I see it, the connection between all of these areas of philosophical concern must be understood. The conclusion I came to is that the connection is the question of the meaning of life. More exactly, I claim that philosophy is rooted in attempts to discover the meaning of life

through a description of the world employing the concept of transcendence. Philosophy's various and diverse problems have arisen in this attempt, I argue, but have now often become far removed from their natural sources of curiosity. Thus at the end of the chapter, I offer an account of constructive inquiry in philosophy, inspired by Meno's Paradox, which is designed to counteract this problem; I have used it ever since.

With my account of the nature of philosophy on the table, I put it to work in providing an answer to the rampant philosophy-scepticism that circulates in our day. This scepticism is based on philosophy's apparent lack of a unified subject-matter, its *a priori* method, and its perceived lack of progress. The point I did not place nearly enough emphasis on in the book, however, is that these perceived problems arise through an invidious comparison with science. The basic thought, as I see it now, is that science is beyond reproach, philosophy has features that are different from science, and therefore philosophy is bad. A popular weapon against philosophy that science-worshippers use, is to disparage it as an 'armchair' pursuit; and defenders of philosophy have displayed dire political instincts by actually *embracing* this description. But seriously, do the action-men and -women of science really write their research papers on the go? Do they not sit at desks? When they get up, they sometimes conduct experiments, of course; because they are scientists. But when philosophers get up, they live and they think; the two often merge. Philosophers often think at their desks, but you would hope that scientists do too. If experimentation really is the be-all-and-end-all, I wonder what experiment I might have performed to see the connection between consciousness, the meaning of life, and the nature of philosophy, which inspired this book? And if thought is obsolete, how is scientific investigation to be rationally directed? In any case, the relation between philosophy and science is something I shall treat much more fully in the sequel to *Meaningless*, which I am currently preparing, and which is entitled *Gods and Titans*.

When philosophers – predominantly in the English-speaking world – turned their backs on concerns like the meaning of life, I think that they lost their sense of identity and, looking around for a new one, became fixated on science; some of the results of this were scepticism about philosophy, aversion to self-reflection, and the piece-meal approach of analytic philosophy. But since this new model of inquiry was not universally

embraced, a split took root in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. I think the situation is more complex with the continental side of the split, where interest in the meaning of life and in providing holistic understanding remained more prominent, and where it seems to have been art, literature and politics, rather than science and mathematics, that provided the new inspiration. I tentatively identify with the analytic side, because I favour argumentative analysis in clear prose, which that side better preserved from the philosophy that predominated before the split. However, I always remember one of my teachers telling me, with a knowing look, that, ‘you’re going to be a continental philosopher!’

In chapter four, I take up one of the hottest topics of debate within analytic philosophy since the 1950s: the problem of consciousness. Enthusiasm for this debate, which is essentially about whether science can tell us what consciousness is, shows no signs of abating. Philosophers who argue that consciousness cannot be incorporated into the scientific world-view of physicalism, or at least that it presents very serious problems for science which nobody yet knows how to overcome, continually infuriate philosophers who think that consciousness is obviously as natural as the birds and the bees, and hence that science can tell us everything there is to know about it. In turn, philosophers of the latter kind continually infuriate those of the former by implying, or even openly stating, that consciousness does not exist. What is primarily at stake in this debate, I have since argued, is philosophy’s voice: for physicalism is a metaphysical position which silences that voice (Tartaglia 2016c). Physicalism endeavours to be the final metaphysical position, which after its triumph, would quietly forget its own status as metaphysical. As I see it, then, the reason the two sides are so entrenched is that the struggle concerns philosophy’s future. If consciousness (or perhaps a related metaphysical concept that will replace it) continues to contextualise the scientific world-view for us, then philosophy will have a future. If not, then I doubt it very much; and so much the worse for us.

After explaining the problem as vividly as I can, I begin by arguing that the distinction between indirect and direct awareness is a red herring in this area. For unless we deny that there are any conscious perceptual states, of the kind you and I are apparently in right now, then we have no choice but to think of experience as providing us with indirect awareness of the world



via a causally mediated process. I then argue that all the various attempts that have been made to incorporate consciousness into the physical world inevitably result in what I call ‘revisionism’; because they must revise our conceptions of either consciousness or the physical world, if they are to make physicalism work. But revisionism is untenable. The dominant kind, which seeks to revise our conception of consciousness, is untenable because our ordinary conception of consciousness will never go away – even from the minds of the revisionists themselves. No matter how well you internalise these theories, consciousness will not seem to be what they say it is. Not only will you go back to thinking of it in the ordinary way when you put the theory aside – that is, as some kind of inner presence, such as a visual image which only you can ‘see’ – but you will think of it that way even in the act of telling yourself you should not; no matter how often you repeat the physicalist mantra. This is hardly surprising, given that human beings have always thought essentially like this, as far as we know, and have constructed their entire world-view on this basis; a world-view that physicalists completely rely upon, thereby demonstrating their inattention to epistemology. How sensible would it be, I wonder, to insist that triangles have four sides, when every time you look at one, or think about triangles, they clearly seem to have three?

Now my PC is currently displaying all the sentences I just wrote, and we could easily make it ‘say’ them too. It could say that, ‘I, the PC, seem to have inner experiences, and cannot shake this impression, despite my physicalist convictions.’ The revisionist thinks my situation is essentially the same as the PC’s would be; for as I argue in the chapter, this is the only stable version of physicalism about consciousness around, namely the one commonly known as ‘eliminativism’, but which now seems to be adopting the improved title of ‘illusionism’ (Tartaglia 2016c). However, I do not think the case for physicalism, such that it is, is remotely strong enough to get me to believe that the PC and I are in the same metaphysical boat; whereas I find the case for thinking that physicalism is a naïve metaphysic which philosophers embraced because of their reverence for science, to be very plausible indeed.

Of course, physicalists will scream that they never said that I was just like my PC; and that is true enough. But the ones with a relatively stable position, the ‘illusionists’, do say that I only seem to be conscious because I

make false judgements. And though they will go on to say that my PC cannot make judgements as I can, this can only be through appeal to my greater physical complexity, integration with my environment, etc. That is, they will appeal to objective conditions that cannot possibly be relevant to understanding the objective / subjective gulf. A nice illustration of this point which I use in the chapter is that of the physical differences between colour- and black-and-white cameras (the old-fashioned kind). Told that the cameras are conscious, physical information will explain the difference between their visual experiences; but it will never tell you that they *have* visual experiences. Yet physicalism is a metaphysic which needs to be able to tell us when and why conscious experience arises from certain physical systems, but not others, as a condition of its own success. It does not avoid this requirement by substituting ‘false judgements that there are conscious experiences’ for ‘conscious experiences’; it just lengthens the terminology. If physicalists insist that the PC cannot make these false judgements, it is only because they think it is not conscious. But the task of explaining how consciousness (or: the right kind of false judgement) arises from the physical world is impossible. It arises because physicalism is a metaphysic that forgets its own starting point.

For those wondering what this has to do with the meaning of life, the answer emerges in chapter five, which is the first of three chapters that provide the core of my metaphysic. In this crucial chapter, I present a new (I think) solution to the problem of consciousness, which is neither physicalist nor dualist nor idealist. According to the ‘Transcendent Hypothesis’, which like any philosophical hypothesis can only be tested by thinking through the implications, we have as much prospect of understanding how experiences could be brain states, as we would during a dream of understanding how dream experiences could be states of the brain within the dream. That is to say, no prospect at all: because dream experience does not ontologically belong to the dream-world. And likewise, if the hypothesis is correct, waking experience does not ontologically belong to the objective world: it is transcendent. Thus reflection on consciousness and the meaning of life bring us to the same place; and in a variety of ways, I think this has always been the direction of travel in philosophy. Moreover I think it has been the right direction, since reality is transcendent.

If reality is meaningless and transcendent, this immediately explains the distinctive dialectic we witness throughout the history of philosophy, in which repeated attempts, repeatedly resisted, have been made to close down the conceptual space of transcendence. The instinctive mistrust of transcendence which drives this process is mistaken, but it is a natural enough one for those who, like myself, do not think there is a meaning of life, and who accept that our objective, physical way of thinking about the world provides all the reason we need to dismiss this possibility. I still have the instinctive mistrust to the extent that I think most people have been attracted to transcendence because of the prospect of a meaning of life. But I overcome it by reflecting on the many rational lines of thought which have led philosophers to the same place, whatever their motivations; and also the mess which metaphysics gets into when it tries to deny transcendence. The equilibrium, I think, lies in a combination of nihilism and transcendence. I am fully aware that in defending this combination, I am likely to bifurcate my readers between those who like the nihilism but not the transcendence, and those who like the transcendence but not the nihilism; I am already beginning to witness this. But the consolation is that my account predicts this, which is a fact that some others may find persuasive.

My guiding thought about consciousness is that it creates differential contexts of existence, and on this basis I explain that our positive conceptions of mental states are misrepresentations which allow us to articulate a world. As I follow through on this agenda into deeper theoretical waters than had hitherto been explored in the book, I try to show how the theory makes new sense of the distinctions between introspection and perception, appearance and reality, primary and secondary qualities, and realism and idealism. My hope is that those who follow me this far will no longer immediately associate ‘transcendence’ with mysticism, religious yearning or, indeed, general wackiness (I do not equate these, but many do). For in my view, the transcendent is *everything*. Name the most ordinary and well-understood thing you can think of; on my view, that thing ‘belongs’, in the loosest possible sense of the word, to transcendent reality. If it exists, then it must so ‘belong’; given that reality is transcendent. The transcendent, as I understand it, is not some ethereal realm that occasionally teases us with its elusive presence. It is all of *this*

stuff. My point is that our objective understanding simply cannot be capturing the nature of this stuff, given certain facts about the world, such as that we are conscious and exist in the present. But nevertheless, this objective understanding, which will only seem to be flawed if you make the mistake of interpreting it as a metaphysic, allows us to form the reasonable hypothesis that reality is transcendent, and thereby allows us to make metaphysical sense of it.

In chapter six, I explore another philosophical route to transcendence, this time via time. Given the connection between transcendence and the question of the meaning of life which I set out before, this builds my case for the centrality of this question to philosophical inquiry, while allowing me to further develop the metaphysic of the Transcendent Hypothesis. I begin the chapter by bringing things down to earth for a while – by which I mean from the philosophical art of justification, to the matters of natural human interest which it ultimately serves – by revealing connections between common anxieties about time, and the philosophical claim that time is unreal. By this method, which I employ throughout the book, my metaphysic remains rooted and purposeful, with its value plain. I then move on to reject Heidegger's revisionary conception of time – thereby completing the critique of Heidegger initiated in chapter one – before making the case that attempts to dissipate the counterintuitive consequences of the 'block universe' theory inspired by modern physics, are hampered by the consciousness revisionism which I diagnosed in chapter four.

This sets the scene for my continued exploration of the consequences of the Transcendent Hypothesis, which, as I now argue, can show us how to accept the block conception, thereby paying due respect to objective thought, without being forced into an untenable denial of the fact that we experience the world from the privileged perspective of the present. The key to being able to make this move is realising that there is both an objective and transcendent sense of 'now', and that there is no more reason to think experience belongs to objective time than to objective space. I conclude that the characteristic perplexities of philosophical reflection on time result from attempting to superimpose the transcendent 'now' upon the objective world. I end the chapter by relating my position to ideas from the Chan / Zen Buddhist tradition. I *think* that Dōgen was driving at the

same point as me; but in any case, I find his example of firewood turning to ash, with which I open the chapter, fascinating and well-worth sharing.

In chapter seven, I move onto the Western philosophical problem *par excellence*, namely the problem of universals. To illustrate: we experience many different particular red things, but what is redness itself? Whenever I teach this topic, I reflect that I could have been doing much the same thing at any time during the last two-and-a-half millennia; which is one reason why I like my job so much. Glorious as the problem is, however, it has become rather dusty and arcane, making it a challenge to get today's students to empathise and fully engage; and when I read contemporary writings about the problem, although I am glad they continue to flow, I do sometimes wonder what the authors think they are up to. As such, I begin the chapter by trying to bring things down to earth again, showing that we actually do have natural concerns about universals, and that they dovetail with and motivate Plato's monumental metaphysic of universals.

After rejecting a strand of scepticism about the universal / particular distinction which originates with Nietzsche, I connect the ancient but still ongoing debate between nominalist and realist positions on this issue, with debates about consciousness and time. We witness exactly the same contours: efforts are made to either deny the existence of a phenomenon (real universals, consciousness, the temporal present), or else to squeeze it into the objective world. The motivation is always to close down the space of transcendence, within which a meaning of life might reside; but these efforts always fail because reality is transcendent. Thus the debates roll on and on. Once more I invoke the Transcendent Hypothesis to try to resolve the standoff. First I try to show how the problem of universals is just as intimately connected with consciousness as time is, by explaining how the roots of the modern conception of consciousness reside in Greek metaphysics. I do not think our conception of consciousness is 'modern' in any very substantive sense – I think it is natural, since people have always thought of their experience subjectively (Homer did; see Tartaglia 2017) – but I do think that philosophy came to thematise this conception more explicitly, as the appearance / reality distinction developed to fit a changing world.

I then present a new argument to show that the instantiation of universals is required by our conception of experience as a self-sustaining

reality. However I do not conclude that this implies the existence of universals, and thereby vindicates realism, because, as I have by this point been arguing since chapter five, our only positive conception of experience is a misrepresentation derived from the objective world. I end the chapter with a discussion of representation, which is a notion I previously needed to simply rely upon in order to get this far. This allows me to explain the ontological status which my metaphysic provides to the objective, physical world; and that is as far as the metaphysic develops in this book.

I now read the final, eighth chapter as thoroughly transitional, since it begins to take up a theme, namely that of philosophical and scientific understanding in the midst of ceaseless technological advance, which will be central to the sequel, *Gods and Titans*; the new book will also give me the opportunity to further develop the metaphysic so as to incorporate free will, personal identity and truth. Providing this transitional link was certainly not my intention at the time, but nevertheless, it was surprisingly soon after I finished *Meaningless* that the plot of the new one started coming together.

In this chapter, in addition to some inevitable recapitulation and consolidation, my main concern is with showing how my position establishes the (relative) autonomy of philosophy. Science cannot solve philosophical problems because its role is to describe the objective world; while philosophy's concern is with the status of the objective world within the context of transcendence. I anticipate that philosophy will continue to oscillate between affirmations and denials of transcendence, but nevertheless welcome this as a fulfilment of its social role: to maintain a rational discussion about transcendence. Against populist, science-worshipping atheism, I argue that religious believers have seen something important, regardless of how they got there: for there *is* a transcendent context, and they are only wrong to think that it is a context of meaning. And in a thoroughly transitional ending (with hindsight), I argue that the provision of a rational way of thinking about these matters, as our social framework advances in ways that make it harder to see, is something philosophy uniquely has to offer us.

### 3. Transition

And that is the book. If you are reading this symposium in the right order, then the main event is about to commence. But before it does, I want to do two things. The first is to thank the ten philosophers who agreed to comment on *Meaningless*. They have very generously given me the opportunity to reflect on and develop my work in the company of thinkers I really respect; money can buy you a Bentley Continental, but not that. It is particularly gratifying that the line-up includes both my teacher (Valberg) and my student (Balmer). Above all, however, I would like to thank the editor, Masahiro Morioka, since this was all his idea. Setting up this journal showed great foresight, and I suspect that its significance to philosophy will steadily increase.

The second thing I shall do is respond to the three reviews of the book that have been published to date. Usually when I read book reviews – and always when I write them – I want to know how the author would respond. And yet there is no institutional mechanism for this; which to my mind removes a great source of philosophical value which academic reviewing could have. In the absence of a *Journal of Philosophical Replies*, then, this symposium strikes me as an ideal forum in which to take the measure of an extra three critical responses to my work.

### 4. Leach, Hawkins and Bennett-Hunter

In the review by Stephen Leach (2016), an elegant summary of the book is followed by two interesting criticisms. The first is that we have no way of knowing whether or not life is meaningless, and hence I have no justification for dismissing the possibility of a meaning of life as ‘idle’, as I like to put it. He says that, ‘All agree, including Tartaglia, that the obvious place to look for the meaning of life is in death. But we know nothing about death. Therefore we have no justification for describing one possibility as idle and another more likely.’ He concludes that since we cannot know what will happen after we die, and hence whether life is meaningful or meaningless, it follows that life is absurd. This is because we fear disappointment at death, but it is a disappointment we will never experience. Leach thinks this phenomenon is at the root of a gulf that exists

between how we think life should be and how it actually is, such that we are continually surprised by disappointment, but rationally should not be. This gulf permeates our social lives and thereby renders them absurd.

If we all fear being disappointed at death on discovering that life is meaningless, it seems to follow that nihilists like me are secretly hoping we are wrong. If there is any truth to this, however, it is surely not that we incoherently fear a disappointment we will never feel, but rather that we fear *death*; that is, our last moments actually being our last moments, rather than the final countdown to an after-life. You might perhaps make some headway in persuading me that I would be happy to be wrong about nihilism if that meant transitioning at death into something new and not altogether worse. But then, I do not see anything inherently absurd in that. I can quite reasonably hope for something which I nevertheless consider to be overwhelmingly unlikely. And generally, I see nothing absurd in maintaining a positive attitude to life, so long as it is grounded in a reasonable assessment of the facts. It might, after all, be perfectly rational to try to escape from a burning building, even if you think it is overwhelmingly likely that you will die in there; you never know, you might just make it. Leach thinks we are constantly disappointed but should not be because we should expect the worst. That sounds like pessimism to me, which can be just as absurd as optimism if not grounded in a reasonable assessment of the facts. Irrational optimism generates unnecessary disappointment, but irrational pessimism generates unnecessary miserableness; and disappointment, unlike miserableness, is a spur to try again.

The reason Leach thinks my nihilism is unjustified, and that we do not know what will happen at death, is that he neglects a central aspect of my position, namely that without misrepresenting it, we cannot know anything about transcendent reality except that it exists. At a first glance, this might seem to reinforce Leach's point, since it would be illegitimate to form any positive hypothesis about what happens to consciousness at death; whether it ends or continues. Surely, then, according to my own principles, we simply cannot know. However, to ask about 'what will happen' inserts the question into the time of the objective world; we can ask the question only by misrepresenting consciousness as something it is not, that is, as something objective. The question only makes sense within the



misrepresentation we live by, then. And within this misrepresentation of consciousness as temporally ordered states in causal communion with the objective world, the states are correlated with the objective states of living human beings, and we have absolutely no reason to think they are correlated with dead bodies, or that they can float free of the objective world altogether; if the latter even makes sense. Objective thought does, however, give us plenty of reason to think that our attachment to the idea of an after-life, and indeed a meaning of life, is the product of wishful thinking and intellectual justifications designed to serve it. So given that the question directs us to objective thought, we must believe what it tells us. Similarly, when assessing nihilism, we have nothing to go on except objective thought; even though the recognition of transcendence opens up the idle possibility that religious believers guessed right.

Leach's second criticism is that the connection I make between boredom and nihilism is unwarranted. The connection in question is that boredom occurs when our immersion in the social framework drops away, thereby leaving us exposed to nihilism, such that our susceptibility to boredom shows a latent sensitivity to this truth, of the kind which metaphysics can exploit. But Leach says that it is just as likely – although he seems to actually think it is more likely – that boredom is a product of our immersion in the framework which 'incites' thoughts about nihilism. Thus rather than boredom being a window onto nihilism, it may rather be that belief in nihilism is a product of boredom. This is clearly where he thinks I went astray, because earlier in the review, he surmised that I am someone who is highly susceptible to boredom. Maybe so, Dr. Freud, but idiosyncratic entry points to philosophy are either false starts or lucky breaks: the reasoning determines which.

Boredom has its uses within the framework, to be sure. When it hits in, it can make you realise that your time would be better spent elsewhere. However it is not always like that, for tasks sometimes bore us when we have no doubt that pressing on is the best possible way to meet the framework commitments that matter most to us. Boredom is essentially disruptive of our framework engagement; evidently so when it is just a hindrance, but equally so when boredom will ultimately be useful to that engagement by providing the spur to re-evaluate our goals. However, in all cases the phenomenon is the same: we are not gripped by goals.

Suppose Leach is right that this is a kind of framework engagement; perhaps it developed because of its potentially useful consequences, or perhaps it is an aberrant engagement that arose through a kind of malfunction. Thus although it would seem to me in boredom that the goals do not grip me, they actually do: in a boring sort of way. The objection would then be that when my goals grip me in this special, boring way, I mistake this for them not gripping me at all, and thereby falsely come to a nihilist conclusion. However, it does not follow that the conclusion is false. For even if I can never shed my immersion in the framework, the nihilist thoughts this special kind of immersion incites in me will still reveal that my goals are a product of ordinary immersion, rather than the meaning of life; for the special immersion will never generate its own goals, even if it inspires more ordinary immersion which does. With the spell of ordinary immersion broken, then, I am better positioned to realise the truth of nihilism. I describe this as boredom providing us with an attunement to nihilism. So even if Leach were right, it would not affect my case. However, I still think my description is better, because I find it less natural to say that when bored, our attitude towards goals becomes one of boredom, than that certain outcomes cease to present themselves *as* goals.

Stephen B. Hawkins (2017) begins his review by calling me ‘a disappointed physicalist’. He is thinking of the fact that I used to be a physicalist – but then, why would that make me a disappointed physicalist? Surely, the situation is just that I once held the belief that physicalism is true, and later found reasons to abandon it. To be disappointed, you must have wanted your belief to be true. But why would anyone *want* physicalism to be true? I can think of two reasons. The first would be that you want it to be the case that human beings can tell the final, definitive story about reality by means of physical science. The motivation here cannot be curiosity about what the story amounts to because physicalism is a metaphysical view *about* the story – it claims there is one to tell and that physics can in principle tell it – so it must rather be something to do with human dignity or the prestige of science. If there turned out to be a reason why the final metaphysical story can never be told by science, then that might be disappointing, if it revealed human, or scientific, limitations. A second reason you might want physicalism to be true stems from anti-philosophical sentiment. Thus you might think that describing the

nature of reality is obviously something only science can do, and be annoyed that anti-physicalist philosophers question the metaphysical status of the scientific description of the world. Physicalism promises to put an end to all of that nonsense.

If you want physicalism to be true for either of these reasons, however, then I doubt you will ever meet with disappointment. For you will not be open to the truth or falsity of physicalism, but rather driven by pride in scientific achievement, disdain for philosophy, or both. No matter how good the argument against physicalism which such a person hears, they are unlikely to be persuaded unless it comes from science itself; and it is hard to see how it could. So the notion of a disappointed physicalist strikes me as rather fanciful. Personally, I am just an ex-physicalist; one who finds it difficult to imagine wanting a metaphysic to be true, unless it were of the religious kind that holds something positive in store for us. I would like to think that the majority of physicalists in academic philosophy today are like this.

Hawkins' image of me as a disappointed physicalist frames his whole reading of the book, I think. He sees my Transcendent Hypothesis as a case of settling for second-best. Since I could not have the physicalist metaphysic I wanted, I instead worked up 'a variety of Kantian idealism, shaped by the scepticism of Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and some strands of Chinese philosophy', in accordance with my overriding concern to stay on the right side of both our scientific and everyday understandings of the world. The only kind of reason I could stomach for rejecting physicalism, pertains to limitations on human understanding which do not impugn or challenge the scientific picture in any way, but rather just place it within a wider, philosophical perspective. Taking this philosophical perspective must neither challenge science, nor remove us from our common-sense, everyday understanding of the world. In short, philosophy must be tangential to science and not at all wacky. Well, I do think a bit like that, so this is certainly an insightful review. Hawkins disapproves, however. He thinks the price I pay to 'shield' philosophy from science is that of 'hiding it away in a corner where, at best, it transforms your attitude, and nothing more'; and that I offer only 'the *status quo* and the freedom of indifference in a universe beyond our comprehension'. Hawkins, by contrast, thinks philosophy should 'demand ever deeper understanding' and

‘make a difference in a real world where real people govern themselves by what really matters.’ He seems to think my philosophy is conservative and apathetic.

I find this reading both intriguing and disconcerting; but I am pretty sure it is not sustainable. In a world where scientism, and its philosophical extension, physicalism, is trying to discredit attempts to place the scientific description of the world within any context other than its own, thereby leaving it as the unassailable absolute truth, there is nothing timid or browbeaten about my view that objective thought must be placed within the context of a transcendent reality whose nature it can never capture; how is that hiding philosophy away in a corner? As to my affirming of the *status quo*, I do this in two ways, both of which I think are sound. Firstly, I do not see any credible way of disputing what science tells us about the world; or any good reason to try to do so. Secondly, I do not see any credible way of disputing what our everyday framework understanding tells us about what life basically amounts to. That picture certainly presents what life *seems* to be, and to argue that it should not seem that way, or that the seeming covers over an incompatible reality, would require exactly the kind of positive metaphysic of a meaningful reality which the book argues is untenable. There is, however, a more philosophically significant sense in which I am certainly *not* affirming the *status quo*; namely by arguing that reality is meaningless and transcendent, and building that argument upon philosophical considerations about consciousness. If that argument is correct, then Hawkins’ demand for ‘ever deeper understanding’ is not going to get us any further than the fact that reality is transcendent.

Hawkins’ line of criticism, according to which I should have been trying to completely revolutionise our understanding of the world and thereby spur us into positive action by revealing what ‘really matters’, did make me wonder what he himself thinks. A reviewer need not reveal their own views, of course, but I did become curious about the nature of the higher stance from which my position was being criticised. A clue is provided, perhaps, when he says that, ‘it should not surprise us to find boredom elevated to a philosophy of life in a book that makes so much of the “everyday”. Philosophy can do more.’ Hegelian is my best guess; possibly Thomist.

In any case, the most explicit criticism in the review is that I should not

have assumed that objective thought is our only substantive interpretation of reality. Hawkins seems to think that philosophy can provide a better, and at least equally substantive, interpretation of reality. Thus he sees a tension between my aim of preserving the everyday understanding of objective thought, and making maximum sense of the world with philosophical concepts. He thinks I am not entitled to assume that philosophy can never overturn objective thought, unless I can supply an argument to show that no explanatorily comparable alternative is possible. In short, my trust in objective thought is uncritical, dogmatic, and – once again – apathetic. I back it up with an appeal to everyday understanding, but in fact everyday understanding is silent on many issues that philosophical concepts can elucidate, such as the nature of matter.

I think there are two main kinds of reason why someone would want to overturn objective thought. The first is to make sense of consciousness; or some other feature of reality which seems to resist incorporation into the objective world as a matter of principle. The second is to make room for a competing form of description which affirms a particular meaning of life; and possibly thereby provokes personal or social action of a kind designed to get us in touch with that meaning. Now in the book I argued that consciousness is transcendent. If that is right, then it is a mistake to think of objective thought's inability to describe consciousness (or other related phenomena) as a shortfall. Hence the first kind of reason for wanting to overturn objective thought is explained away. I also argued that life is meaningless, and so the ultimate nature of human life does not provide any clues about what we should be doing with ourselves: these are matters we have to decide. That removes the second kind of reason. As I see it, then, the position I defended in the book removes any compelling reason for wanting to replace, or seriously question the legitimacy of, objective thought. Everyday objective thought tells us little about the nature of matter, I grant, but its extension – namely science – certainly does. If my account of consciousness is on the right track, then we have no reason to think there is anything wrong with a broadly objective account of what appears within the context of conscious experience. And in any case, common sense alone, it seems to me, dictates that we are never going to get an alternative of remotely comparable substance.

The review by Guy Bennett-Hunter (2016) is a prime example of the

bifurcation of critical response I expected; he likes the transcendence but not the nihilism. The central criticism the review revolves around is that I fail to refute the best argument for the claim that there is a meaning of life – the one Bennett-Hunter agrees with – and hence fail to establish nihilism. He says that I do not explicitly address this argument, despite promising to do so in the introduction, but that my implicit response not only fails, but is, he strongly implies, outrageous. This is because it amounts to an invitation to stop thinking about the matter; philosophers ‘of all people’ should never do this, he says, thereby neatly using my own turn of phrase against me.

The argument in question is that we would not be able to carry on if nihilism were true, and so given that most of us do carry on, there must be a meaning of life. Now a great many of us apparently *think* nihilism is true, of course; atheism is on the rise, and signs in cafes saying that life is all about ‘the journey, not the destination’ are very popular. Perhaps such people are psychologically spurred on by the humanist belief that we ‘make our own meaning’. I do not think so, however, because this kind of intellectual justification comes only after the event, and popular as this one has become, it is obviously not universally believed; not by me, and not by a great many people who would deny that there is a meaning of life, without having considered the philosophical question of what motivates goals in its absence. Bennett-Hunter, however, thinks motivation requires the psychological spur which belief in a meaning of life provides. But he fails to realise that this plays no part in his objection. For according to that objection, whether you believe there is a meaning of life or not, there can be no motivation without a meaning of life. If the meaning of life is there, we can feel motivated; but if it is not, we cannot.

Bennett-Hunter gets close to realising this implication when he says, ‘there is a *logical* [my emphasis] as well as a psychological need to suppose that life has meaning and nihilism is false.’ He believes in both needs, but only the logical one has any role in his objection. Whether or not we have a psychological need to believe in a meaning of life makes no difference. Presumably, he thinks that those of us who would deny that we have any such need nevertheless have it at some undetected psychological level. But even for those who fully recognise this need in themselves, and think it is being satisfied, the psychology would be completely ineffectual

if the meaning of life were not there. Should the meaning of life somehow recede, then they, like the rest of us, would slump to the ground.

This view is unstable according to Bennett-Hunter's own principles; as well as independently implausible. If he knows that nihilism is impossible, given that goals motivate us, then he must know some feature of transcendent reality which is required for motivation. We know square circles are impossible because we know about squares and circles. To know that nihilistic motivation is impossible, then, would require knowing something about both meaningless realities and motivation. But if the reality is the objective world, we already know that nihilism and motivation can coexist: motivation would be part of such a meaningless, objective world. If it is transcendent, however, then we cannot know anything about it that would rule out motivation. Bennett-Hunter's main philosophical interest is in ineffability, and his interesting and original work argues that reality is both transcendent and ineffable (Bennett-Hunter 2014). As such he, of all people, should not be claiming that meaninglessness is impossible for transcendent reality: if we cannot say what it is, then we certainly cannot say what is or is not possible for it. So long as it is even possible for transcendent reality to co-exist with motivation, however, then we have no reason to look to a metaphysic of transcendence to explain motivation; for objective thought does the job perfectly well. Human beings naturally want things because this allows them to survive and find satisfaction. That seems to me a perfectly good explanation of why we find it so easy to be motivated.

I am criticised for encouraging philosophers to stop thinking; but what I really said is this. Think about nihilism as long and hard as you like. Eventually, as a plain matter of fact, you will stop; and when you do, if you are psychologically healthy, you will probably find goals motivating you just as much as they always did, despite the fact that you were recently considering the intellectual position that they never terminate in a meaning of life. If your reflection went well, then you will have endorsed nihilism as a non-evaluative position, and hence will never have thought that you *ought* to resist the natural motivation kicking back in: for nihilism does not say that we ought not to be motivated by ordinary goals. If Bennett-Hunter wants the reflection to run on and on, then fine; but I suspect this is just because he does not like the natural terminus – and that is because he is still

thinking of nihilism as evaluative, and negatively so. Saying that the meaning of life is ineffable sounds to me suspiciously like what someone might be expected to say if they were determined to avoid nihilism, could not find the meaning of life, and were intrigued by the history of religious mysticism.

When in the introduction to the book I mentioned the kind of argument which attracts Bennett-Hunter, in connection with David Cooper's views, I took the worry behind it to be that without belief in a meaning of life, of the kind that is still widespread, people might find their commitment to goals drain away. That is why I said that the worry, 'overestimates the importance of philosophy'; meaning that our commitment to goals can get along just fine with or without philosophical justification. I addressed this worry at length in chapter two; I was not thinking of Bennett-Hunter's view that the meaning of life sustains our motivation directly, rather than indirectly via our belief in it. As to his complaint that my views on nihilism and transcendence do not connect up, I really do not know what more I could have done to make the connection plain and to place it squarely at the centre of the work. My account of the unity of philosophy depends on the connection, and I use it to explain the typical lines of opposition to be found in debates about consciousness, time and universals. I use the connection to explain opposition to nihilism, opposition to transcendence, and the distinctive value of philosophy. These explanations are backed up by detailed descriptions of the ways we misrepresent transcendent reality. Present me with an apparently ineffable experience, and I will do my best to describe and explain it: philosophy *begins* in wonder.



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## Transcendent Reality and the Consciousness Problem

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### Abstract

James Tartaglia makes original use of the idea of transcendence in order to answer various philosophical questions of contemporary and historical importance. I tackle the attempt to use his transcendent hypothesis to solve the problem of consciousness. Tartaglia describes the problem of consciousness as arising because we conceive of the objective world as composed of “centreless” objects and that any view that attempts to identify consciousness as a part of the world as presented to objective thought will fail since consciousness is inherently centred. His proposed solution is to suggest that a transcendent reality must be able to account for consciousness, but I argue that his characterisation of this reality entails that it too must be composed of centreless parts and thus the transcendent hypothesis fails to solve the consciousness problem.

Positing that we can best describe reality as something about which our knowledge is unavoidably impaired has been a recurring theme in philosophy since its inception. Given that another of the paradigmatic issues defining the field of philosophy is what kind of meaning, if any, life is imbued with, it is also not historically uncommon for these two *prima facie* unconnected themes to find common ground in philosophical works.

What is unique in Tartaglia’s book *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (hereafter referred to as “PML”) is how Tartaglia threads these concepts together. He posits that questions surrounding the meaning of life, although resolving themselves in our ultimate realisation that nihilism is true within the context of the physical universe, have enabled us to discover the concept of transcendence in attempting to figure out if there is some further context within which it makes sense to attribute meaning to our lives. We could only demonstrate nihilism to be false using the concept of transcendence, he then argues. This, Tartaglia argues, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the benefits that can be gleaned from considering the possibility of transcendence, as it is also able to provide answers to major philosophical questions that have persisted over centuries of thought, namely those pertaining to issues of consciousness, universals and time.

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Although Tartaglia's approach to each of these issues needs to be addressed, I will be objecting in this essay specifically to his claim that positing a transcendent reality can be used to solve the problem of consciousness given how prevalent discussion of this issue is in contemporary metaphysical inquiry. In particular, I will be arguing that even if the idea of transcendence does present itself as an option when we consider difficulties in interpreting how consciousness fits into the world, accepting the existence of a transcendent reality does nothing to reduce these difficulties and in fact can only serve to increase them. As such, Tartaglia has failed to demonstrate that the concept of transcendence functions as a useful philosophical tool in finding a resolution to the problem of consciousness.

## **Nihilism and Transcendence**

Tartaglia frames philosophical enquiry as stemming from two kinds of question about reality. These questions are about "ontology and enframement" or "what exists and why it exists" (Tartaglia 2016: 71). Philosophy as a discipline arose once these two kinds of question could be answered together using the concept of transcendence.

Transcendence is a rare sort of concept that seems viable as a candidate for providing answers to both "what" and "why" questions by positing that the kinds of things we familiarly describe as making up the world around us exist within a wider context. This means that we are able to suggest that the things around us have the nature they do *because of* this wider context, and thus that we can better understand both what the world is and what sort of purpose the constituents of the world as we know it are capable of having.

In asking what purpose life has, which is the initial major question addressed in PML, we are asking about the context of meaning within which life itself exists. This question is very different to asking what function something used *within* life serves. If I ask what the reason is for you moving a particular piece on a chessboard, what I wish to know is how making that move could get you closer to your overall goal of checkmating your opponent. Since I assume that your action of making that particular move exists within the wider context of your intention to checkmate your opponent, my question can be understood as addressing the purpose of the single move you just made within that wider context. Where the question of the meaning of life differs from the question of the meaning of a particular chess move is that humans often do things, such as move

chess pieces, because they want to achieve a certain result, whereas it is not clear that there is anything outside our various wishes and preferences that is able to provide a context within which life as a whole has meaning. The physical universe, which science informs us is responsible for our existence, does not seem to be the sort of thing capable of having a certain goal in mind. The answer to questions about the meaning of life also cannot be provided with essential reference to other living beings because we can simply ask the same question about them; if we suppose that the purpose of your life is to be useful to other people, then this presupposes that the lives of these other people already have meaning, which is precisely the question we are trying to answer. Thus, nihilism seems to be a logical conclusion to draw from our understanding of how our lives fit into the wider context of a physical universe.

Positing that there may be a further transcendent context that is able to account for the physical universe and, ultimately, our lives “provides us with an idea of what would be required for nihilism to be false” (ibid.: 52-53). That is, although the physical universe is unable to account for life having meaning, the only way this could fail to demonstrate that life indeed does not have a meaning is if it were the case that the physical universe itself existed within some wider context and within *that* context life serves a particular purpose. While it is ultimately a mystery what this purpose would be, this follows from the fact that our understanding of transcendent reality necessarily lies outside of our understanding in the same way that within the context of a dream we often have no knowledge of the physical world (ibid.: 51). Questioning whether or not life has meaning, then, ultimately leads us to the concept of transcendence, although it is interesting to note that transcendence is equally compatible with either the truth or falsehood of nihilism (ibid.: 77).

This provides a general understanding of how transcendence operates with regard to philosophical questions. By framing the physical universe and, more importantly, our lives within a wider context, it is possible for those lives to serve a purpose. What is important for a critical evaluation of Tartaglia’s position though is the manner in which transcendence provides such a context.

There seems, on the face of it, to be an obvious objection to Tartaglia’s claim that transcendent reality could provide a context of meaning within which life exists, which is that, in the same sense that the physical universe alone cannot provide a context of meaning because the physical universe, if it is all that exists, does not itself exist for a purpose, surely it is the case that transcendent reality

will necessarily run into the same problem. It is, in fact, difficult to envision *anything* that would be able to provide a context of meaning whilst at the same time being immune to questions about the purpose of *that*.

Tartaglia's response to this is to state that this response "betrays a lack of imagination" (ibid.: 52). Since we have no awareness of a transcendent context, we have nothing to base our assumption that "an account of the purpose of things would not culminate in the brute fact of meaningless existence, but rather in the fact of purposeful existence" (ibid.: 52). He then states that, "although we cannot rule out the possibility, we have no good reason to believe in it either" (ibid.: 52).

This is an important point when it comes to evaluating Tartaglia's position because it demonstrates how the transcendent hypothesis works as a response to philosophical questions. It has the potential to be able to account for meaning in life precisely because we have no knowledge of this reality. Even if, as Tartaglia suggests may be the case, transcendent reality is also meaningless, the transcendent hypothesis still stands as being capable of explaining how life can have meaning because our limited conception of that reality prevents us from knowing whether it is meaningless or meaningful. The epistemic limitation of the transcendent hypothesis is thus precisely what lends its strength to the idea of transcendent reality; this reality may be capable of performing a wide variety of roles which we struggle to find another viable candidate for in our philosophical theories as a result of the fact that our ontology seems not to include the sort of things that can account in any clear way for certain phenomena, such as meaning and consciousness.

The trade-off is that by accepting transcendence we open the door to the possibility that life has meaning but we also sacrifice any hope of being able to provide either a positive or negative answer to that question. We simply must accept that we cannot know.

Accepting a limitation on the knowledge of reality it is possible for us to attain is not a problem in and of itself, but when it comes to arguing that the transcendent hypothesis constitutes a solution to specific metaphysical problems such as the problem of consciousness the issue is different. Because the truth of the transcendent hypothesis is equally compatible with nihilism being true or false, it does not matter whether or not transcendent reality really is capable of providing the metaphysical basis of meaning. There are two possible states of transcendent reality in this sense, as being meaningful or meaningless, and we are unable to tell which one it is. On the contrary, if the transcendent hypothesis is able to solve the

problem of consciousness as Tartaglia states (ibid.: 120), it must only be compatible with *one* possibility, which is that transcendent reality *is* capable of providing the metaphysical basis of experience. Thus the conditions for the truth of the transcendent hypothesis are more stringent when it comes to determining whether or not it can account for consciousness, and it seems to me clearly demonstrable that it does not meet these conditions.

There are three key arguments that provide the foundation for Tartaglia's transcendent hypothesis, which I will now outline in turn.

### **1) Consciousness cannot be accounted for by objective thought**

Tartaglia defines "objective thought" as our "everyday way of thinking about the nature of the world" (ibid.: 83), such as thinking of a cinema room as being essentially composed of "objects in space made up of various different types of material" (ibid.: 83). This view "readily extends to take in the whole universe: the cinema is located on planet Earth, which is itself simply a very large object within a vast space containing astronomical objects composed of various materials" (ibid.: 83). The way we ordinarily conceive of consciousness as fitting into the world as described by objective thought is that a person sitting in a cinema and watching the screen has a particular perspective on the objective world that would differ from the perspective of any person sitting in a different part of the cinema.

The trouble arises when we try to explain which aspect of the world as described by objective thought is supposed to be able to account for consciousness.

there is nothing there to indicate that the organic objects should be centres of conscious experience; there is nothing in the scene to indicate that there should be any experiential centres at all (ibid.: 84).

Although we "superimpose experiential centres onto the objective world" (ibid.: 84), there is nothing within objective thought that is able to give us an account of why it is the case that any objects should be centres of experience. Objective thought seems to be able to readily provide an account of reality that is centreless where all objects simply exist in certain places and are made of certain materials, but for which there is no perspective. As such, we cannot account for consciousness by reference to the world as described by objective thought. This

also means that scientific understanding, which is a form of objective thought, will be unable to provide us with an explanation of how consciousness fits into the world.

## **2) A transcendent hypothesis solves the problem of consciousness**

Tartaglia dismisses the possibility of describing consciousness as an illusion produced by brain activity (a view that Tartaglia calls “revisionism”), a view he attributes most closely to Dennett (*ibid.*: 90) since, as he argues, the idea of a perceptual illusion relies implicitly on the idea that the individual is having an experience that may mismatch reality or otherwise must simply be “nothing more than a dumb reflex, rather than a rational if ultimately misguided response to the evidence” (*ibid.*: 93). Using the example of an individual who judges that they are having the experience of feeling dizzy, Tartaglia argues that our inclination to make such judgements “necessarily lacks any rational explanation on the revisionist model, because that model denies that there are any dizzy experiences - or anything similar that might be mistaken for one - to provide the evidential basis of my false judgement” (*ibid.*: 93).

He also dismisses consciousness as being identical to brain activity as he believes it to simply lead us back to revisionism. Tartaglia argues that those who try to argue that conscious states are simply brain states have not managed to properly deal with the basic criticism that conscious properties seem to be completely different to properties of the brain (*ibid.*: 95). Using the example of staring into a green light and then seeing an afterimage when you close your eyes, he argues that identity theorists such as Smart have attempted to avoid mentioning the properties of the afterimage at all by stating that when we perceive an afterimage there is simply something going on that is similar to that which happens when we are seeing a green light. This attempted evasion, however, under-describes the situation since the “something” that is going on when we are seeing an afterimage is experiential and thus still requires explanation (*ibid.*: 96).

He also dismisses functionalism on the grounds that this attempts to avoid the problems of the identity theory by stating that conscious properties are realised by physical states rather than being identical to them but, Tartaglia argues, this does not avoid the difficulty because the problem is in imagining a physical state being sufficient to ‘realize’ an experiential state (*ibid.*: 96-97).

Tartaglia also then argues against the position that conscious properties can be

identified with properties of the brain by stating that the properties of an afterimage would have to be a misconception of the properties of brain states. He uses the example of an experience of an after-image that is a green oblong with fuzzy edges and states, “If we are actually conceptualizing a brain state, then, we must have formed a radically false conception of it, given that it is not green and oblong with fuzzy edges” (ibid.: 97). The point being driven toward is that, if we have such a radically false conception of our experiences, we have simply ended up with revisionism once more.

Finally, he dismisses dualism as an example of metaphysics finding itself “forced to tamper with objective thought’s conception of the world” (ibid.: 102) by positing that there is some special attribute of the brain that it is capable of interacting with the non-physical, which contradicts what we know from objective thought that “the brain is not radically unlike everything else in the world” (ibid.: 101).

In place of these problematic perspectives, Tartaglia refers to his metaphilosophical considerations earlier in the book and suggests that we are plausibly interested in the problem of consciousness because “it raises the possibility that reality transcends the objective world” (ibid.: 102). To give a feel for how this could explain the nature of consciousness, Tartaglia invites us to imagine that transcendent reality stands “to the objective world as the objective world stands to a dream” (ibid.: 103).

In that case not only are the dream-trees I see transcended by the wider context in which I am asleep; my dream-thoughts must be as well. For any reality there is to the thoughts and feelings we have in a dream must be found in the real world, not the world of the dream. (ibid.: 103)

The way this is supposed to account for consciousness is by positing that consciousness is not ontologically dependent upon the “centreless” constituents of the world as described by objective thought, but is rather ontologically dependent upon transcendent reality. There are difficulties inherent in understanding the nature of the ontological dependency of consciousness upon transcendent reality; since “The transcendent context of existence being hypothesized is one of which our knowledge is seriously curtailed” (ibid.: 106) we have no reason to suppose that we will awaken from our lives into transcendent reality. Indeed, this could not be so because if we did awaken into this context of



existence “it would not be the final context, since consciousness, according to the hypothesis, is always transcendent” (ibid.: 106). As such, although they must have some sort of ontological dependence upon transcendent reality in virtue of the fact that our entire conception of reality must be ontologically dependent upon the final context of existence, experiences cannot be *identified with* any aspects of transcendent reality, “since the transcendent reality of the final context – in which independent being is to be found – is not something we could consciously experience in such a way as to allow us to distinguish one part of it from another” (ibid.: 106).

Although individual experiences are not aspects of transcendent reality, consciousness as a whole is. That is, although experiences are not identical with parts of transcendent reality, the awareness we have of those experiences simply in virtue of having them is a self-awareness of transcendent reality. Just as in a dream our awareness that we are having dream experiences can only be an awareness of a world transcending the dream (i.e. that we are lying in bed having certain experiences) even while the content of those experiences need not be of anything within the world transcending the dream, our awareness that we are having everyday experiences must be an awareness of a world transcending objective reality even while those experiences are not of transcendent reality (ibid.: 106).

In short, Tartaglia states that the problem of consciousness can be solved by the transcendent hypothesis because it does not attempt to describe how a centre of experience can fit into the world as described through objective thought, which is centreless. Although this does not tell us what would constitute an accurate description of the ontological basis of experience, this gap in our understanding is attributable to the nature of transcendent reality being unknowable as it is in itself, rather than as arising from inconsistencies between our conceptions of the objective world and experience.

### **3) We misconceive experience**

Where Tartaglia’s viewpoint distinguishes itself from any form of idealism is in its denial that we have a clear and accurate conception of experience. The transcendent hypothesis “denies that we have any legitimate conception of experience except that it is transcendent” (ibid.: 118). His argument for this position is that our conception of experience relies upon concepts borrowed from

objective thought; we conceive our experience of a tree as being of “an array of colour suitably arranged into the shape of a tree” (ibid.: 110), but this cannot be a correct conception of experience because spatial arrangement is something that belongs to the objective world and it does not make sense to say that ideas and physical objects can both share the same shape. Since when we attend to our experience of a tree all we find is “something shaped like a tree” and experience cannot have shape, this must be a misconception. This problem applies equally to secondary qualities; if our experiences cannot have shapes, then there is nothing for phenomenal colours to fill.

The reason for the misconception is that we are attempting to interpret experiences “as if they were things in the objective world, when in actual fact – as we realize on further reflection – they have no place there” (ibid.: 111). As such it is objective thought that provides us with our dominant description of reality, with our conception of experience being parasitic upon this main picture. It is also an extremely useful part of our overall picture of the objective world because it allows us to explain how it is that somebody can misjudge some aspect of the world, such as thinking that a tree has darker leaves than it actually does.

This leads us to believe that experiences are causally dependent upon the brain, which functions “to facilitate our interpretation of reality as an indirect awareness of an objective world” (ibid.: 112). Yet, this view must ultimately be false because it relies upon a misconception of experience and in actual fact “experience does not causally interact with the objective world, and neither is it a part of that world; since experience and the objective world are both parts of an interpretation of transcendent reality” (ibid.: 112).

As such, the only thing our conception of experience gets right about the true nature of experience is that it exists (ibid.: 117). Furthermore, we should not expect to understand the nature of the independent reality underlying experience, “since as conscious beings we can only know reality as it appears within consciousness; and consciousness is always transcendent” (ibid.: 118).

So, by virtue of having experience, we know that there exists some reality beyond the objective world but experience is unable to tell us any specific details about the nature of transcendent reality because of the fact that we misconceive experience.

## How the problem of consciousness persists

Tartaglia attributes the persistence of the problem of consciousness to competing schools of thought seeking either to argue that there exist things beyond the objective world or seeking to affirm objective thought by denying transcendence. By arguing for a hypothesis that puts our conception of objective reality before our conception of experience, while still maintaining that consciousness does transcend objective reality, the transcendent hypothesis “promises to resolve this impasse” (ibid.: 121).

The supposed advantage of the transcendent hypothesis with relation to the problem of consciousness is that it does not try to place centres of experience in a world that is posited as being centreless. Even if we do believe it to be inexplicable that consciousness should be a part of objective reality, it could be stated that the transcendent hypothesis does not provide us with an answer to the problem of consciousness on the grounds that believing that consciousness relies on an unknowable transcendent reality necessarily leaves the ontological basis of consciousness just as far outside the realm of our understanding. Yet there is a significant difference between the problem of consciousness that arises in relation to objective thought and the problem that arises from considering the epistemic limits of the presented conception of a transcendent reality. The claim is that our conception of reality as presented by objective thought is of a world precisely in which there are no centred parts, such as centres of experience, and thus consciousness necessarily lies outside any coherent conception of objective reality, whereas we can only ever have a very limited conception of transcendent reality and this does not self-evidently demonstrate that consciousness *cannot* fit into transcendent reality. Indeed, the obscure nature of transcendent reality is arguably a strength when it comes to avoiding such a problem; it is seemingly because we cannot comprehend transcendent reality that we cannot conceive of some aspect of transcendent reality that is *incapable* of forming the ontological basis for consciousness.

Such attributes can be conceived of, however, due to the fact that there are certain negative claims we can make about the nature of transcendent reality, given that we know that it cannot have the attributes we associate with objective reality or experience, since both of these conceptions are what apparently produce the problem of consciousness to begin with. To demonstrate, let us take the third claim outlined above, that we misconceive experience. Whatever transcendent

reality is, under Tartaglia's account of consciousness, it must be able to account for us misconceiving experience. We cannot give an account of this misconception fully with reference to objective reality because this would entail revisionism, which Tartaglia rejects. However, giving an account of this misconception that makes essential reference to some aspect of transcendent reality does not seem like a particularly tall order; given that we know so little about transcendent reality it does not seem too problematic to state that it is in virtue of *some* aspect of this reality that we end up misconceiving experience even if we are unable to state which aspect we are talking about. All we know, then, is that when we misconceive experience, or any particular experience, we are actually misconceiving some aspect of transcendent reality.

So, while we cannot know much about transcendent reality, we can know that it or some aspects of it are capable of giving rise to various misconceptions of experiences. There is a further inference we can make though and that is that, whatever it is that forms the ontological basis for our misconceived experiences, it cannot be experience itself. Since consciousness is always transcendent, the "final context" can never be within consciousness and as such the independent reality that forms the ontological basis of experience cannot be experience itself.

What this means is that experience is ontologically dependent upon something non-experiential. If we misconceive experience as being a certain perspective within objective reality, given that experience equally cannot inhabit transcendent reality, we must ultimately be misconceiving consciousness as being a centre of experience.

If this is so, the misconception of consciousness as a centre of experience must have as its ontological basis some feature of transcendent reality, which I will refer to as transcendent X.

### **What is transcendent X?**

Perhaps the better way to phrase this question would be not to ask what transcendent X *is*, since we seem to be guaranteed not to have a clear answer to this due to the unknowable nature of transcendent reality, but it would be better to ask what transcendent X *is not*. We can know some things that transcendent X isn't.

For instance, transcendent X cannot be an object or a collection of objects because, if it were, it would be just as incapable of forming the ontological basis

for consciousness as the world as revealed through objective thought. There would be no use in positing a transcendent reality that suffered the exact same problems as that of objective reality since this would simply be to retain the same philosophical problems but to add a great deal of obscurity to our metaphysical picture of reality on top. We can conclude straight away then that transcendent X does not fit our conception of any aspect of the world as presented within objective thought.

Transcendent X also cannot be experience because our conceptions of experience are *misconceptions*. Thus, in order for transcendent X to be experience, it would have to also be a misconception.

There is no option here to bite the bullet and simply accept that transcendent X is a misconception. It may sound like a logical possibility; after all, we necessarily know so little about transcendent reality that stating that we misconceive it seems to be almost blatantly obvious. However, this bridge was already burned when revisionism was rejected.

To recap, as Tartaglia stated, we cannot rationally make sense of the idea that experience is an illusion produced by objective reality because without experience we cannot make sense of the idea of an illusion at all. We need the concept of experience to make sense of the idea that you can be aware of something other than the way the world actually is. As such, there has to be some ontological basis for illusions that, Tartaglia argues, objective thought simply cannot provide. Similarly, transcendent X cannot be a misconception in and of itself because transcendent X is supposed to be the way the world actually is; transcendent reality is conceived as having independent existence. For something to be misconceived, it has to be mistakenly supposed to be something other than what actually exists and the one thing that has existence beyond how we conceive it, according to Tartaglia, is transcendent reality. You can have neither illusions nor misconceptions without there being a distinction between appearance and reality, whether that's a difference between what we experience and what is actually present in the world or a difference between what we conceive of and what actually exists.

The only available option, then, is for transcendent X to form the ontological basis for experience without being experience itself. The trouble here is that, as in the case of objective thought providing an explanation of consciousness, experience must be accounted for by something non-experiential, which could be problematic.

There is still plenty of room to muster up a defence of the transcendent hypothesis though. After all, the problem with our conception of consciousness and objective thought wasn't that these two things combined cannot describe how experience can exist in a world of non-experience, but rather that they cannot describe how a centre can exist in a world of centreless parts. As such, in order for Tartaglia's model to not run into the same problem, all that we need to be able to say about transcendent X is that it is centred.

### **Is transcendent X centred?**

It is the nature of consciousness as a centre that supposedly forces us to be confronted with the problem of consciousness and inspires us to the view of transcendence. If consciousness is a centre of some sort, perhaps a centre of misconceived experiences, then our only two options are to accept that consciousness must either have transcendent X as its ontological basis or it must *be* transcendent X. Although Tartaglia chooses the latter option, neither is satisfactory as they both leave us with something remarkably similar to the problem of consciousness that they were posited in order to avoid. Let us regard these two possibilities in turn.

If consciousness were dependent upon transcendent X, this would mean that a centre of experience were ontologically dependent upon something that was not itself a centre of experience. This does not immediately present itself as a problem since we have only said that a centre of experience needs to be ontologically dependent upon something that can account for centres, not that it necessarily has to be ontologically dependent upon a centre of experience in and of itself. Yet, if we know about transcendent reality that it is composed of things that are not centres of experience, then the situation seems to be remarkably similar to that of the original problem that was supposed to lead us to explore the possibility of transcendence in the first place. If all we can say about transcendent X is that it is not a centre of experience, then once again we are trying to fit centres of experience into a world made of things that, even if they are centres of some sort, are not centres of experience.

The trouble is that we make sense of the idea of a centre purely in terms of its relation to experience. Consciousness exists as a centre for me because when some things happen in my visual field, certain kinds of vibrations in the air reach my ears, or my body is affected in particular ways, I experience these things from a

particular perspective. Yet, if experience is misconceived, then it cannot be the case that my perspective is anything other than a misconception. This would entail that our very idea of there being centres of perspective or experience is itself a misconception.

This situation is not helped by simply disregarding the requirement to provide an ontological basis for experiences, given that they are misconceived and as such do not have an ontological basis. Even if they are misconceptions, these misconceptions must be accounted for in the same sense that an illusion must be accounted for in a revisionist model of consciousness. We still have to make sense of the idea that a centre of experience, whatever that actually is, has as its ontological basis something that is not itself a centre of experience. As such, we are still left with the conclusion that consciousness must be a misconception.

If consciousness is a misconception, then this entails that transcendent X must be something that is not a centre of experience, which means that consciousness still exists in a world that consists of nothing that is so centred. This seems so similar to the problem of consciousness that it seems as though we have paid the price of assuming that we cannot understand the nature of independent reality in order to simply end up with the same problem we started out with.

If, as Tartaglia concludes, consciousness *is* transcendent X this may seem to resolve the issue. In this case, consciousness has independent existence and does not have anything that is not centred as its ontological basis. This seems to evade the problem of consciousness neatly.

The trouble is that consciousness cannot be a centre *of experience* as we ordinarily conceive it. If experience is a misconception, and our notion of consciousness is of something that is at the centre of our perceptions and perspective, then we must be misconceiving what consciousness is. Our notion of a “centre of experience” does not capture what consciousness is, because consciousness has independent existence whereas the notion of a centre of experience is a misconception.

As such, even if consciousness is a centre *in some sense*, it is not a centre of experience, and as I have suggested it is not entirely clear what the notion of a centre even really means once we consider experience and perspective to be misconceived. This means that under the transcendent hypothesis, I still have to attempt to make sense of the idea of a centre of experience fitting into a world consisting of things that are not themselves centred. Once again, we seem to have arrived at something that seems like almost a trivial re-wording of the original

problem of consciousness and as such we seem to have travelled a great distance with no perceptible gain.

Unfortunately, this seems to exhaust all of the available options. Either consciousness is a centre of experience that is ontologically dependent upon centreless parts, or our centre of experience is misconceived as being a part of consciousness. The first option leaves us with something closely resembling the problem of consciousness, since consciousness still must be accounted for in terms of centreless parts, and the second option also leaves us with something closely resembling the problem of consciousness, since centres of experience still must be accounted for in terms of centreless parts.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Tartaglia offers an original and ambitious alternative to the accepted model of consciousness fitting into an everyday conception of objective thought. It strives to avoid the problem of consciousness by taking away objective reality's role in providing the ontological basis for consciousness and giving that role to the mysterious transcendent reality instead.

The trouble is that even if we cannot understand transcendent reality, using the same arguments that Tartaglia uses to oppose other positions, such as what he calls "revisionism," we are able to determine that transcendent reality cannot have any features that would be required to account for consciousness in any better way than objective reality.

Given that the motivation here for accepting the transcendent hypothesis was supposed to be to avoid the problem of consciousness, winding up with more or less the same problem defuses this inclination to move to such a position entirely.



## Reply to Adam Balmer

James Tartaglia\*

‘Adam Balmer’ may well be a name to watch as this century’s philosophy unfolds, I am inclined to think, and this gem of a paper adds to my inclination. He does not take the approach of criticising a variety of my claims, but rather devotes his energy to providing one sophisticated argument against the transcendent hypothesis; which is of course absolutely central to the book. If you can do it, as Balmer can, then this is the way to go – if you want to progress a philosophical discussion.

Before I get to that argument, however, there is a point in his exposition which I will comment on, since it sets the scene by revealing Balmer’s train of thought. What he says is that our epistemic limitations as regards transcendent reality – that we cannot say anything positive about it, except that it exists – are what allow me to gain so much metaphysical mileage. To put it more bluntly than he ever would, I am thinking, ‘the objective world cannot explain phenomenon X, so I’ll let transcendent reality do the job – since nobody can say anything about transcendent reality, they can’t prove me wrong’. If that were my tactic, then I would not really be explaining anything; I would be cheating, somewhat. As Balmer puts it,

The epistemic limitation of the transcendent hypothesis is thus precisely what lends its strength to the idea of transcendent reality; this reality may be capable of performing a wide variety of roles for which we struggle in our philosophical theories to find another viable candidate as a result of the fact that our ontology seems not to include the sort of things that can account in any clear way for certain phenomena, such as meaning and consciousness. The trade-off is that by accepting transcendence we open the door to the possibility that life has meaning but we also sacrifice any hope of being able to provide either a positive or negative answer to that question. We simply must accept that we cannot know. (p. 4)

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He then goes on to say that this might well work with the question of the meaning of life, where given that reality is transcendent, we cannot say whether it is meaningless or not. For in this case, it does not matter to my position whether or not that reality is capable of providing the metaphysical basis of meaningful lives. But the situation is different with consciousness, however, because if consciousness is transcendent, then I am committed to the view that transcendent reality can, and in fact does, provide its metaphysical basis.

Now it cannot have escaped Balmer's attention that the first sentence of the first chapter of *Meaningless* is: 'There is no overall point to human life.' And that thereafter, I frequently refer to the 'truth of nihilism'. As such, it is not looking as if I actually did take the cautious, non-committal stance on the meaning of life which he attributes to me. What I think he is really saying, with characteristic drollness, is that I *should* have said that we cannot know whether or not reality is meaningful, given my commitment to the transcendence of reality. So let us explore why I did not say that.

I think we can make claims to knowledge, and consequently state truths without excessive circumspection, in full awareness that we might be wrong. If it turns out that we are wrong, then we did not really know what we thought we knew; and what we took to be truths were not. But nevertheless, unless we think the prospects of our being wrong are worth taking seriously, we have no good reason to hold back on knowledge and committed truth claims; if we exercised a neurotic level of caution, these concepts would lose their role within our lives. I might be dreaming, in which case I do not know I have hands, and, as I said in the book, Heidegger might live on as the world's oldest man. But I know I have hands and that Heidegger is dead; to deny this would be to redefine 'knowledge' as something very rarely attainable, leaving us in need of a new word to do the old job. As such, I do not exercise the caution Balmer recommends, and claim that nihilism is true, while also claiming that life might have a meaning. This is because I think it might have a meaning only in the idle sense that I think Heidegger might be alive. Objective thought persuades me that belief in a meaning of life is widespread, not because of its sensitivity to truth, but because of social and historical factors. And metaphysics persuades me that we have no reason to think our notion of meaningfulness has applicability to transcendent reality; and that incomplete as it is, objective thought provides our best guide to the nature of that reality. As such I recognise the possibility because, as Balmer

says, if reality is transcendent then we know nothing which could rule it out – but I dismiss it as idle. With this in mind, let us now turn to the argument.

The argument is that although I deny that we can have positive knowledge of transcendent reality, my argument for its existence actually commits me to specific negative claims about it, which inadvertently rule out its ability to provide the metaphysical basis for conscious experience. So my manner of arguing for a transcendent reality ultimately leaves that reality just as lacking in resources for solving the problem of consciousness as the objective world is, thereby landing us back at square one; except with the distinct disadvantage of an ontologically extravagant transcendent reality on our hands. Arguments rarely come neater.

The two key negative claims in question are firstly, that the transcendent world cannot be objective, and secondly, that it cannot be experiential. The first must be right if the transcendent world in question provides the final context. If experience, as we conceive it, cannot exist in this objective world, then it cannot exist in any objective world, and so its final ontological destination cannot be an objective transcendent world. No analogue of Trendelenburg's Neglected Alternative exists for the transcendent hypothesis, then.

On the second negative claim, Balmer says,

Since consciousness is always transcendent, the "final context" can never be within consciousness and as such the independent reality that forms the ontological basis of experience cannot be experience itself. (p. 11)

He is right that the final context cannot be *within* consciousness; if it were, then it would not be the final context. Consciousness creates a differential context of existence, according to which experience is found and misconceived at one level (that is how things are *within* consciousness), but independently exists at the higher one. As such, anything found and misconceived by a conscious being will not be the final context of existence. But it does not follow that experience does not exist in the final context. On the contrary, it must do, given that experience is real and reality is transcendent. Experiences are what we find within consciousness. We get the idea of what an experience is, along with the idea that experiences are centred at a particular temporal and spatial location, from objective thought. Since this idea is incoherent (subjective and objective), we cannot suppose that it characterises what experiences are in the final context; and if this context is transcendence, we have no reason to suppose that any of our ideas

are applicable to it anyway. But nevertheless, what we are calling ‘experiences’ must have transcendent existence, given that they exist, that they cannot exist in the objective world, and that consciousness ontologically defers whatever we find within it to a transcendent context.

Balmer says that,

under the transcendent hypothesis, I still have to attempt to make sense of the idea of a centre of experience fitting into a world consisting of things that are not themselves centred. Once again, we seem to have arrived at something that seems like almost a trivial re-wording of the original problem of consciousness and as such we seem to have travelled a great distance with no perceptible gain (pp. 14-5)

But ‘centred’ is only what experiences would have to be if they existed in the objective world; they would have to be centred within a world which has no centres. When we leave behind the misrepresentation by which we think of them as centred, however, then there is no longer any problem of fitting centres into a centreless reality. We have no reason to think of the transcendent reality as containing centred experiences, or of that reality as being either centred or centreless. Think of the radical ignorance that someone who has only dreamed has of the waking world. They have no basis to assert that their experiences must be centred in the waking world, just as they are in the dream. But they know those experiences exist, and they have no other way of thinking of them, when they try to elevate them to what they take to be the ontological level of waking reality, except as ‘experiences’ taking place ‘now’.

To return to our earlier discussion, it is now possible to see why Balmer is mistaken in thinking that the epistemic barrier provided by a commitment to transcendence counts against me in the case of consciousness, in a way which it does not with the meaning of life. He is thinking that I need a positive claim in the case of consciousness, but that I do not with the meaning of life; a positive explanation of the kind physicalists would love to provide, starting with the fundamental reality (physical, in their view) and leading inexorably to something which fits our natural conception of experience. Within their metaphysic, however, there simply cannot be any experience; despite the fact that experience is what their metaphysic is designed to explain, in terms of what it presents to us. I, on the other hand, need no such explanation, because I think our natural conception

of experience derives from objective thought, and hence will be inapplicable to transcendent reality. Similarly, I think our notion of a meaningful life is bound to be inapplicable to transcendent reality. Nevertheless, human life and conscious experience exists. So I claim that life is meaningless and that consciousness is transcendent. I am more reticent about calling the latter a 'truth', because I have to rely on dreams providing a model of how experience works in general; but I think it is true.

In the final count, any explanation of a phenomenon will have to end with, 'that's just what it is'. Dualism provides that kind of answer for consciousness by saying that minds have their own kind of reality; but people were not satisfied because they knew about another kind, the physical, and wondered how the two got on. Physicalism wants to provide a final 'that's what it is' too; but whenever it tries, people keep saying, 'that just can't be what it is'. It should come as no surprise, then, that the transcendent hypothesis ultimately says: 'consciousness is transcendent ... that's just what it is.' If you were expecting an amazing, surprising answer, then that could only come from physicalists, since objective thought is where our detailed understanding resides. But I bet that if Balmer looks back on this passage on his eightieth birthday, he will have never encountered such an answer. Still, the transcendent hypothesis does offer a fairly surprising answer, as befits the question. And it provides new insight into consciousness, with its split-level and misrepresentation theses. It explains where the debate came from; what drives it on; many traditional distinctions and lines of opposition; connects it up with the subject-matter of our discipline and natural sources of interest; ties it in with time and universals. What more did I need to do? At the end of his essay, Balmer refers to 'the mysterious transcendent reality'. But it is *our* reality; the familiar one we know and love. I was just offering a metaphysical interpretation of it.

## Is Consciousness Transcendent?

Comments on James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*

Philip Goff\*

### Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss James Tartaglia's view on consciousness, as laid out in chapters 4 and 5 of *Philosophy in a Meaningless life*. Chapter 4 is an excellent critique of physicalist accounts of consciousness. In chapter 5, Tartaglia develops an original and intriguing alternative: the 'transcendent hypothesis', the view that both consciousness and the physical world it puts us in touch with are elements of a reality whose nature is entirely unknown. I will raise small concerns about the critique of physicalism. More broadly, I worry that there is a tension between chapter 4 and chapter 5: it seems to me that if the arguments of chapter 5 succeed in demonstrating that consciousness is unknowable, then this undermines the anti-physicalist arguments of chapter 4. Finally, I will respond to Tartaglia's rejection of more standard alternatives to physicalism.

In general, analytic philosophy has less to say about the meaning of life than other philosophical traditions. Many analytic philosophers doubt that questions concerning 'life's meaning' are themselves meaningful questions. Certainly the vast majority of analytic philosophers (and I put myself in this category) will feel that they can get on with their own little branch of philosophy – ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, or whatever – without relating it to questions pertaining to the meaning of life. In so far as the problem of life's meaning is taken seriously, it is seen as an isolable philosophical issue that a philosopher may or may not be interested in.

In this context, it is wonderful to find, in James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, a return to true systematic philosophy. Three central topics of philosophy – consciousness, time, and universals – are dealt with through a single approach, an approach focusing on the meaning of life. Each chapter is rich and thought provoking, but in this essay I will focus on the two chapters of the book (4 and 5) that deal with consciousness.

Chapter 4 is an excellent critique of physicalist accounts of consciousness. In chapter 5, Tartaglia develops an original and intriguing alternative: the

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‘transcendent hypothesis’, the view that both consciousness and the physical world it puts us in touch with are elements of a reality whose nature is entirely unknown. I am broadly in agreement with the rejection of physicalism, but I will raise some responses to the argument of chapter 5 in support of the transcendent hypothesis. More broadly, I worry that there is a tension between chapter 4 and chapter 5: it seems to me that if the arguments of chapter 5 succeed in demonstrating that consciousness is unknowable, then this undermines the anti-physicalist arguments of chapter 4. Finally, I will suggest that Tartaglia presents a less than conclusive case against more conventional alternatives to physicalism, such as dualism and panpsychism, and that these might be better options for the anti-physicalist.

### **Can physical science account for consciousness?**

Physicalism is the view that fundamental reality is entirely physical. There are broadly speaking two approaches the physicalist can take to consciousness: reductionism and eliminativism. The reductionist tries to account for consciousness in terms of physical processes in the brain. The eliminativist denies that consciousness exists, and in this way dispenses with the need to account for it.

The latter option is not very popular. For most phenomena, you’ll find some philosopher willing to deny its existence: free will, moral value, the material world. But the reality of consciousness seems so evident, that few philosophers are prepared to embrace out and out eliminativism about it. What could be more evident than your present experience of colours, sounds, emotions, etc.? Perhaps because it has few adherents, the case against eliminativism is not well explored. Most are happy to take the reality of consciousness as a non-negotiable starting point.

Tartaglia offers an extremely interesting argument against eliminativism, going beyond just pointing out its basic implausibility. In the case of eliminativism about other phenomena – free will, moral value, God, or whatever – the eliminativist is able to make sense of the *rational basis* for belief in the entity in question. The eliminativist about, say, free will, ultimately thinks that belief in free will is false, but she will have something to say about *why* people believe in free will, something that makes sense of how rational women and men could come to believe in such a thing. Many eliminativists would say that people

believe in free will because it sure *feels* like we make free decisions.

In the case of eliminativism about consciousness, however, it's hard to see what could be said. One cannot say (as one would probably want to say in the case of free will) that it *feels* as though we're conscious, because of course to accept the reality of feelings just is to accept the reality of consciousness. It seems that the consciousness eliminativist will have to say that we just have a basic, ungrounded, disposition to claim that we have experiences, contrary to the reality. As Tartaglia puts it:

... the enduring inclination is to judge that I am having a certain kind of experience. But if I am not, and there is nothing in the objective world that I could mistake for an experience, then this inclination can have no rational basis, and must rather be an automatic and senseless reaction. This, however, is not how it strikes us at all: it is not as though I inexplicably find myself wanting to spout the word 'I'm having an experience' without knowing why; as if believing we have experiences were like suffering from Tourette's syndrome.' (p. 94)

This seems to me a powerful and ingenious way of strengthening the case against eliminativism.

What about reductionism, the more popular form of physicalism? Tartaglia argues, quite powerfully in my view, that reductionism collapses into eliminativism, and so ends up being just as implausible. The problem is that our concepts of consciousness richly characterise it, and that that characterization is inconsistent with the characterization physicalists give of it. Physicalist U. T. Place argued that our concept of a green experience amounts to nothing more than 'the sort of thing we have when we see something green.' Such a minimal characterization leaves the metaphysical nature of the green experience completely open, and hence leaves it open that the green experience could turn out to be a brain state (which is exactly Place's view).

The problem is, as Tartaglia puts it, 'our conception of conscious experience is not remotely this anodyne' (p. 96). He argues that, contra Place, our ordinary mental concepts characterise green experience as *having a green quality* ('although not 'green' in the same sense we use to describe a patch of light'). And more broadly, we have a rich understanding of what an experience is: it is a certain kind of self-aware state. These kinds of essentially subjective properties



have no place in the objective picture of the world we get from physical science. The reductionist has managed to account for ‘consciousness’ by re-defining it. It’s a bit like claiming to have proved the existence of God, by redefining ‘God’ as the physical world, and then claiming that the existence of the physical world entails the existence of God.

The currently dominant form of physicalism – the so-called ‘phenomenal concept strategy’ – tries to avoid this difficulty by claiming that we refer to our conscious states *directly*, rather than in virtue of any of their properties. We think about ‘water’ in terms of its superficial characteristics, such as its being colourless and odourless, and its being the stuff that falls from the sky and fills oceans and lakes. But, according to the phenomenal concept strategy, we don’t think about our conscious experiences in terms of any of their characteristics; we simply have a capacity to, as it were, blindly point at them through introspection: pain is ‘that thing’ \*points at introspectively\*. If this is our relationship to pain – a kind of blind pointing – then there seems no way of ruling out that the thing we blindly point at turns out to be a physical brain state.

Tartaglia’s reply is that to point blindly isn’t really to have a concept at all:

[the phenomenal concept strategy] forgets what it means to have a *concept* of something. My concept of a tree is what I believe the tree to be: it is how I think of it. It is true that I can have a false conception of a tree and yet still manage to refer to it; just as I can refer to a man at a party as the one drinking a martini even if he is drinking water. However, even a false conception presents my conception of what the things is; the Phenomenal Concept Strategy cannot exempt introspective concepts of this basic requirement ... (p. 98)

I’m not so sure. In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke claims that proper names refer in virtue of a causal connection between the name and the referent, rather than in virtue of an associated description. A school child can refer to ‘Galileo’ without knowing anything about him (perhaps they mistakenly think he was a famous explorer), which shows that they can’t be picking him out in terms of any of his characteristics. The child manages to pick out Galileo because they use a term, i.e. ‘Galileo’, which is causally connected in the right kind of way with Galileo himself. This account of proper names seems to me fairly plausible, and it suggests that the concept expressed by a proper name is a kind of blind pointer.

I think it's better to say, not that there are *no* blind-pointer-type concepts, but simply that it's pretty implausible that *experiential concepts* are blind-pointer-type concepts. When I think about pain in terms of how it feels, I know something about its essential nature. That's what prompts my concern when others feel pain; I know what pain is, and hence I know it's a terrible thing to endure. We might bolster this claim with reference to Tartaglia's claim that we characterise experiences as self-aware states: to characterise a state as self-aware is to have a positive conception of it, not just to point blindly at it.

However, these are finer points of dialectical strategy. I agree with Tartaglia that the physicalist can accommodate consciousness only by *revising* our ordinary concept of experience, pretending that those concepts are more minimal than they in fact are. And this means that, in terms of consciousness as we ordinary conceive of it, the physicalist is an eliminativist. And as Galen Strawson remarks (reported by Tartaglia), eliminativism about consciousness is 'the silliest view ever put forward.'

### **The Transcendent Hypothesis**

Tartaglia rejects not only physicalism, but also the standard alternatives to physicalism, such as dualism, panpsychism and idealism. I will get to his concerns about these views presently. But first I want to explore the line of reasoning that gets Tartaglia to his favoured position: the transcendent hypothesis. According to the transcendent hypothesis, ultimate reality transcends our understanding of it. Ultimate reality, for Tartaglia, contains consciousness, but not in a form that corresponds to human understanding of it. The transcendent form of consciousness is entirely unknown.

The move towards the transcendent hypothesis begins with some reasons for thinking that our ordinary conception of consciousness is hopelessly flawed. As Tartaglia notes, it is a traditional view in modern Western philosophy that the mind is better known than the body, indeed that we have a perfect grip on the nature of our experiential properties. He argues, however, that upon reflection, our experiential concepts turn out to be mere 'shadows' of our concepts of properties in the material world. We seem to find in our experience shape-like properties: my experience of the tree in front of me seems to be tree-shaped. And yet 'our only notion of spatial arrangement and shape belongs to the objective world. We have no other notion, and besides, this is evidently the

notion we have in mind; the shape we discern in the experience is the shape the tree has, just as a photograph of a tree has the shape the tree has' (p. 110).

What about the greenish quality I find in my experience of the tree's leaves? Colour, as Tartaglia notes, has often been taken by philosophers to reside primarily in the mind rather than the physical world. But he then rejects this traditional view, with an argument reminiscent of Berkeley's attacks on Locke: 'if experiences do not have a size and shape, they can hardly have a colour which fills that size and shape ... the greenness I had in my mind filled the contours of my experiences; but since experiences can have no contours to be filled, this cannot be a property that experiences possess' (p. 111). What philosophers think of as the properties of experience – 'phenomenal shape' and 'phenomenal colour' – are so described using concepts borrowed from our concepts of features of the external world. We dress experience up in the clothes of external reality in order to make sense of our idea of it as an internal mirroring of that external reality.

I remain unpersuaded. Phenomenal colour and phenomenal shape *represent* their external analogues: when I see a tomato I have an experience which represents a red, round thing at a certain distance from me. But I see no reason to doubt that there is 'mental paint' doing the representing, mental paint with an intrinsic character known through introspection. We call a certain intrinsic property of experience 'phenomenal colour' because it represents phenomenal colour, and another intrinsic property of experience 'phenomenal shape' because it represents phenomenal shape. But this fact is not inconsistent with their having an intrinsic character of their own known through introspection. I do not take myself to have given an argument for this view; my only claim is that I can't see what reason Tartaglia has given us to doubt it.

Tartaglia presses the Berkeleyan argument:

... as Berkeley has pointed out, resemblance between ideas and physical objects makes no sense; and we might express this point by saying that if experience does not belong to the objective world, then an experience cannot resemble something objective in virtue of shape. We might try to get around this by talking of an abstract isomorphism rather than a resemblance, such that something about the nature of experience systematically correlates with the shape of the tree. But to say this is to admit that the notion of shape is inapplicable to experience, despite the

fact that when I attend to my experience, all I find is something shaped like a tree; the experience of the leaves is *above* the experience of the trunk and so on. (p. 110)

Certainly there is something we find in experience that we feel inclined to describe in such spatial terms. But I still don't see why I cannot say that that thing is an intrinsic phenomenal character – known in terms of its essential nature – and that it is external shape which is unknown – or rather known only in terms of its structural commonalities with phenomenal shape. On this view, it is our conception of external shape that is a mere 'shadow' of our conception of phenomenal shape, rather than vice versa. Again, I have not given an argument for the epistemic priority of phenomenal properties over external properties, but I cannot see that Tartaglia has given an argument for his converse prioritising of external properties over phenomenal properties.

But what is this 'phenomenal character' that we know through introspection? Tartaglia complains that we can't say much about it:

If I want to tell you what the experience of green is, for instance, I have but three very inadequate options: I can compare it to another colour experience; tell you how to get it so you can find out for yourself; or say some very general, philosophical things, such as that it is a subjective state that alerts people to the presence of green light. None of this remotely compares to the detailed knowledge than can be imparted about things in the objective world (p. 107).

It is a familiar point that experiential qualities are in some sense ineffable. But this is plausibly due to the fact that the concepts we use to pick them out are primitive. Compare to other plausibly primitive concepts: existence, metaphysical possibility, causation, the notion of a reason. It is arguable that none of these notions can be explained in more basic terms. If someone asks you what it is to have a reason to perform a certain action  $\phi$ , you might say 'It's for it to be the case that something counts in favour of  $\phi$ ing.' But this is really just to use different words to express the same concept. There is nothing mysterious about this, we have just reached the basic epistemic building blocks of our picture of the world. If, as seems plausible to me, experiential concepts are also epistemically basic, then we should likewise take it that we can't say much very

informative about the nature of a given experience. The nature is known, but it is known only through actually having the experience itself. If you have to ask, you'll never know.

Tartaglia goes on to argue that our conception of experience is not only inadequate, but flawed. This further argument goes as follows (p. 112):

1. In order to make sense of experiences representing the external world, it is necessary to conceive of experiences as being causally determined by the environment.
2. However, given that experiences are not part of the objective world, they cannot be causally impacted by features of the objective world.
3. Therefore, the notion that experiences represent the external world is incoherent.

The second premise seems to me to depend on equivocation concerning the word 'objective.' Experiences are not 'objective' in the sense that they are subjective properties, i.e. properties which characterise the subjective experience of an individual. But they are perfectly 'objective' in the sense that the facts about experience are perfectly objective facts about reality. If I am having a pain with a certain phenomenal character, then it is a fully real fact about the world that I am having a pain with that particular phenomenal character. If someone thinks I am not having that pain, then they are wrong. And if experiential properties are in this sense perfectly objective features of reality, then why should they not causally impact on the physical world? In the last section we saw reason to doubt that experience properties are *physical*; but just because a property is not physical it does not follow that it cannot causally impact on properties that are physical. The belief that a non-physical God impacts through miracles in the physical world, whether or not it is true, does not seem to be incoherent.

I am therefore not persuaded that I have reason to abandon the traditional view, which seems to me quite plausible, that the nature of experiential properties is (more or less) perfectly known through introspection. And for this reason, although I find the transcendent hypothesis intriguing and worth further consideration, I do not as yet take myself to have reason to accept it.

## A tension between the two chapters

In chapter 4 Tartaglia argues against physicalism on the grounds that we have a rich conception of consciousness and one at odds with the characterizations of consciousness offered by physicalists. In chapter 5, Tartaglia argues that we know absolutely nothing about the true nature of consciousness. This is most explicit at the point when his discussion touches on considerations pertaining to the famous ‘knowledge argument’ against physicalism. In the much discussed version formulated by Frank Jackson, the genius brain scientist Mary has spent all of her life in a black and white room, from where she has learnt everything there is to know about the physical processes involved in colour vision. One day she escapes her room and, for the first time, sees something red. For proponents of the knowledge argument, Mary at this point learns something new: what it’s like to see red. This is supposed to show that there is more to red experience than can be known from physical science.

Tartaglia certainly wants to agree with the conclusion of the knowledge argument: red experiences are part of unknowable transcendent reality, and hence their nature cannot be known through physical science. But if red experiences are transcendent, then Mary’s experience of red cannot teach us anything about their nature either:

... it is easy to be misled by the thought that in having experiences we learn something new, namely *what it is like* to have them. There is something important to this though, since there is no experience in the objective world ... [h]owever ... it is a mistake to infer ... that knowledge of ‘what it’s like’ is knowledge of a different part of reality than the objective world. These are mistakes because in having an experience, and making sense of it in the only way we can – namely with objective thought – we are forming a misconception. (p. 115-6)

Why do I need to make sense of experience in terms of objective thought? Why can’t I form a perfectly adequate conception just by conceiving of my experience in terms of what it’s like to have it? It seems that I can entertain the possibility of solipsism – the hypothesis that all that exists is myself and my mental properties – and in doing so I think about my experience without bringing in the idea of anything from the external world. Why is this not a

perfectly adequate conception of my own experiences? I suspect there may again be an equivocation in talk of ‘objective’ thought and reality. The conception I form of myself and my experience when I entertain the epistemic possibility of solipsism is ‘subjective’ in the sense that it characterizes reality in terms of properties of subjective experience, but it is also perfectly ‘objective’ just in the sense that it is an objective fact about reality that I really am instantiating those subjective experiential properties.

Moreover, if I have no adequate conception of my experiences, and hence know nothing about their nature, how can I know that their nature is not entirely physical? The anti-physicalist arguments of chapter 4 depended on my having rich knowledge of the nature of experience, which enabled me to rule out that my experiences are physical brain processes. But if I know absolutely nothing of the nature of my experiential properties, then these arguments seem to be undermined.

Indeed, Tartaglia adopts a response to the knowledge argument popular among the phenomenal concept strategists, the very physicalists he argued against in chapter 5:

... it is said that someone acquainted with objective thought’s final story about the nature of red, would upon seeing red for the first time learn what it is like to see red – which is not something they could have known before ... [this is] best accounted for in terms of their acquisition of demonstrative concepts. Thus when they see red, they acquire a new demonstrative concept of it as ‘that’ property, the one they are indirectly aware of when they have a certain type of experience; as well as a shadow concept of ‘that’ as an experience of red. However although this will allow them to recognize red when they see it, and the experience of red when they have it, it will not teach them anything new about reality under either interpretation. (p. 116-7)

According to many phenomenal concept strategists, the reason we can’t know a priori the conscious states are physical states is that our experiential concepts are demonstratives, and hence do not reveal to us the physical nature of their referents. It is an empirical fact that our experiential demonstratives pick out physical brain properties. Given that Tartaglia also thinks of experiential concepts as demonstratives that leave us in the dark about the nature of

experience, how can he be so confident that experience doesn't have a purely physical nature? The arguments of the previous chapter depended upon our having a rich conception of experience, but the demonstrative account we find here seems to undermine that.

### **What's wrong with dualism and panpsychism?**

Tartaglia spends much more time rejecting physicalism than he does rejecting the traditional opponent of physicalism. There has been much discussion recently of Russellian monism, a view which has two components:

1. Physics fails to reveal to us the intrinsic nature of matter, telling us only about its structural or dispositional properties
2. The intrinsic nature of matter is made up of conscious, or proto-conscious, properties.

Tartaglia's quick rejection of this view is premised on understanding Russellian monism as in competition with physical science, a competition which the former looks certain to lose:

... philosophers are in no position to pontificate on the inadequacy of our conception of matter; this is a concern which long ago passed into the hands of empirical science. And besides the inadvisability of philosophers stepping into core scientific territory as anything more than interested bystanders ... the fact remains that in a contest between our ordinary conception of consciousness and objective thought, objective thought wins hands down. Objective thought provides the foundation for all of our understanding of the world, and cannot be put in doubt by a philosophical problem. (p. 99-100)

However, Russellian monists do not see themselves as in competition with natural scientists, or trying to interfere with their work. The point is that, from Galileo onwards, natural scientists have been involved in a rather limited kind of project: mapping the causal structure of the universe. They have simply not been in the business of speculating about the intrinsic nature of matter. Philosophers should certainly leave it to physicists to tell us what the causal structure of



matter is. But they shouldn't leave it to physicists to tell us its intrinsic nature, because this is simply not the job of a physicist.

Russellian monists do not propose a competition between theorists of the objective physical world and theorists of consciousness; rather they propose a way of bringing both together in contributing towards a unified picture of reality. On this unified picture, consciousness is the intrinsic nature of the stuff physics describes extrinsically.

Tartaglia is even quicker in his rejection of dualism. In order to make sense of the interaction between mind and the physical world '... the dualists must attribute to the brain a unique capacity to interact with the non-physical world' (p. 102). But Tartaglia has already rejected any such 'metaphysical specialness' of the brain: 'we know from objective thought the brain is not radically unlike everything else in the world; it is the most complex organ in the human body and the one science currently knows least about, but it is nevertheless still a physical object, metaphysically on a par with every other' (p. 101-2).

This is reminiscent of the standard anti-dualist argument from the alleged 'causal closure' of the physical world. If the physical world is causally closed, then there is no space for the mind to do any causal work by making changes in the brain. However, although often stated, the causal closure of the physical is not often defended with empirical argument. It would be nice to hear a little bit more from Tartaglia of the case for causal closure.

## Reply to Philip Goff

James Tartaglia\*

I believe that the most important task for philosophers of the generation Philip Goff and I belong to is that of discrediting, once and for all, the metaphysic of physicalism. In a collection called *The Waning of Materialism* (aka physicalism), the editors provide an impressive list of major philosophers – from the period in which physicalism was supposed to have achieved hegemony, to the present in which it is supposed to possess it – all of whom reject, or have very serious doubts about, physicalism (Koons and Bealer 2010: ix). A little reflection upon that list makes it plain that the big players, in the main, have not in fact been physicalists. After looking at some of the problems with physicalism, the editors go on to say that,

it is natural to predict that, among the major mature philosophers in the future, a significant portion (perhaps sometimes a majority) will reject materialism. Even among those who start out as materialists in their youth, a significant number are likely to end up doubting materialism's ultimate viability or suspecting that the materialism / anti-materialism debate is moot, and in either case recognizing that some versions of anti-materialism have rational credentials at least as good as materialism's. Thus, even though it is likely that in future the ranks of materialists will continue to see new recruits, especially among newcomers to philosophy, the character of the problems facing materialism will continue to inspire very serious doubt. If this is the case, materialism will in one respect continue to wax; in another it will continue to wane. (ibid.: xxi)

Not good enough; this prediction needs to be falsified. We do not need more protracted waxing and waning, but rather a swift, clean and decisive break. It would do the discipline a world of good; both inside and out. If most of the big players never bought physicalism, and yet young philosophers continue to be so

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swayed by our scientific, anti-philosophical culture that they are prepared to accept the scant arguments in its favour to prop up their initial prejudices, then the big players have not been taking the problem seriously enough.

Physicalism is not just a false view in metaphysics, but a corrosive force which affects how philosophers go about their business, keeping our discipline insular and culturally ambiguous; hence inconspicuous and uninfluential. (Philosophy's rapid cultural decline in the UK is nicely captured by a recent piece in the *New Statesman* (Herman 2017)). And yet physicalism does seem pretty obviously true when you start thinking about it within the context provided by our scientific culture: *of course* science tells us the nature of everything that exists, and so if philosophy (whatever that is) has anything to add, it can only be at the fringes. Physicalism achieved its supposed hegemony with intuitions of this kind. In one of its most influential breakthrough papers, Smart tells us that, 'sensations, states of consciousness, do seem to be the one sort of thing left outside the physicalist picture, and for various reasons I just cannot believe that this can be so' (Smart 1959: 142). Then after completing the paragraph with his reasons, he begins the next with, 'The above is largely a confession of faith' (ibid.: 143). Well exactly: faith in science, and a lack of faith in two-and-a-half thousand years of philosophy, during which physicalism, which has been around since Democritus, was rarely taken particularly seriously.

What changed? What changed is that science became really impressive in the twentieth century and religious influence on intellectual life consequently declined. Little or nothing philosophically changed as regards the merits of physicalism. But physicalism was a *scientific* metaphysic, in the sense that it handed the central task of metaphysics to science. Religions embody a philosophy, so with their declining influence, philosophy was on the back foot. Not wanting to get caught on the declining side of the divide, it threw itself into the reluctant and ambivalent embrace of science; generally indifferent, sometimes encouraging, but more often hostile. Philosophers subsequently learned, like the rest of scientific culture, to think of anything non-physical as 'spooky'. 'What sort of chemical process could lead to the springing into existence of something non-physical?' asked Smart. 'No enzyme can catalyse the production of spook!' (Smart 1963: 660). Do not get me wrong: I think Smart was probably the best philosopher that physicalism ever produced, for at least he was self-aware, and he did have a plausible theory; after Smart, physicalism ran out of those. But as soon as you start to reflect philosophically upon the status of the physical world, however –

which is what philosophy had always done prior to the advent of physicalism – then the notion of ‘non-physical’ takes on a whole new light. Although I would heavily qualify it, I am inclined to agree with Hegel that, ‘A philosophy which ascribed genuine, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy’ (Hegel 1816: §316).

These days the situation has become really extreme. In a symposium which Goff and I recently contributed to, Daniel Dennett says that, ‘most philosophical theories are just definitions defended, with no aspiration to make novel predictions but rather just to assign the phenomena covered by the “theory” to some category or other.’ (Dennett 2016: 67-8) In other words, unless you are looking to make ‘novel predictions’ – unless you are a scientist – then you are wasting your time. No more subterfuge then; the anti-philosophy that was always integral to physicalism is brought right into the open by this astonishing and no doubt heart-felt statement by Dennett. Trying to make a rational, well-argued case for a description of the world which satisfies human curiosity about natural questions such as how experience fits into the world we experience, whether we are free, or why the world exists – all of that is reduced to ‘definitions defended’ and assigning ‘the phenomena covered by the “theory” to some category or other’. Straight into the bin with the entire history of philosophical inquiry, says physicalism. It makes me proud to be writing about the meaning of life.

Physicalism needs to perish and fast. As it gets bolder, its negligible philosophical foundations become more exposed; so the time is ripe. Physicalism may seem obvious within the context of scientific culture, but the case against it can be made just as obvious with a little philosophical context. Thought ‘experiments’, as they have come to be called, certainly have their uses; but as the name suggests, excessive reliance upon them is to the physicalist’s advantage. The instinctively physicalist philosopher can maintain their instincts in the face of them, so long as they are clever enough to spot a gap. Philosophical context is the real key, I think. Physicalism must reluctantly operate within that context, and when that is made clear, the arguments are stacked up against it. And with the metaphysic broken, as it will be, the culture that prompts it can also be broken; for people do remain open to philosophy, I think, on those rare occasions when they are still exposed to it. Philosophy could flourish during the next Roaring Twenties. Institutional security is no excuse for looking away from its wider cultural decline.

I doubt Goff would disagree with much of what I have just said, if any of it,

but it does provide the essential context for my response to his paper. As I fully expected, his critical reading of my theory of consciousness is razor-sharp and always constructive. But although we have invested in different theories of consciousness, with consequently different ramifications for our metaphysical beliefs in general, we are both arguing against physicalism. I am inclined to think that the latter is the main thing we are doing. Of course, physicalists disagree with each other too – about how best to accommodate consciousness within the world-view of physicalism – and everybody is just trying to determine the truth about consciousness, of course. But the situation across the physicalism / anti-physicalism divide is highly asymmetrical.

Physicalists have no reason to *care* about the particular truth their attention has alighted upon, namely that pertaining to consciousness. They talk about it because anti-physicalists do; and this because it presents an obvious problem for their metaphysic. I very rarely detect much, if any, metaphilosophical self-consciousness among physicalists. When they disagree among themselves, it is simply a matter of disagreement over how best to bat off the latest annoying anti-physicalist meme. The metaphysics is already settled in their minds; science determines that, at the end of the day. All that matters to them, within their internal disputes about whether or not to grant consciousness metaphysically supervenient or simply conceptual credit, is which tactic best silences the anti-physicalists. If they were to win, the only result would be an end to philosophical discussion about consciousness; science could take over at that point. Apart from the benefits to their careers of publishing on the matter, they really have nothing to win. Anti-physicalists, on the other hand, have an extremely substantive and self-aware unity of purpose: that of bringing the metaphysics back to philosophy. Succeed, and they win the conceptual space to debate fascinating speculations about the ultimate nature of consciousness, such as Russellian Monism and the Transcendent Hypothesis, within a more self-confident, interesting and culturally attractive discipline. The fact that anti-physicalists have substantive metaphysical disagreements should not be mistaken for a disadvantage, on the grounds that they lack the unity of the physicalist side. It is in fact a major advantage; their disagreements presage the kind of fruitful debates which philosophy could be filled with were physicalism not holding it back, and their metaphilosophical unity of purpose in trying to take us to that place is far more compelling and inspiring than the physicalists' metaphysical consensus. Consensus in science gets things done; but philosophy is not science, and excessive consensus in philosophy may

simply be a sign that the ideas have dried up.

When I was reading Goff's paper, reflections such as these kept reminding me of a sentence in my book which he does not mention, but which has played on my mind ever since I wrote it. After arguing that attempts to insert consciousness into the objective world inevitably result in 'revisionism', in that we end up trying to revise our conception of either experience or matter, I say that,

If revisionism is necessary, then, it is Dennett who takes it in the more sensible direction, that is, towards experience rather than matter. (PML, p. 100)

I take this back. The reason I said it is that I do not think it is credible for philosophy to disagree with the characterisations of matter we receive from objective thought; whereas experience is prime philosophical territory. Philosophy must tell us about the metaphysical status of the world objective thought describes (to which physicalism has the simplest and most unreflective answer possible), but it is not within its remit to get involved in the first-order description itself; and any attempt to do so is liable to look ludicrous, given how advanced our science now is.

I still think this, but I had not thought the matter through sufficiently, and hence wrote a false sentence. Given the choice between the Russellian Monist view that matter has an intrinsically experiential nature, and the eliminativist view of Dennett that we are not conscious, but rather falsely judge that we are, then the former is infinitely more sensible. This is because, on the eliminative view, *you and I are simply not here to do any judging*. In *Meaningless*, I reluctantly reached the conclusion that eliminative physicalism 'could still be true' (PML, p. 95), despite the incredible unlikelihood of its actually being true, given both the nature of the proposal and the thoroughly dubious motivations for it. Since then I have been circling around this idea (Tartaglia 2016 and 2017). I now see that it could not be true. For even if our conception of conscious experience is all wrong about its nature, it must at least be right that it *has* a nature, and that as such, people have what we naturally think of as a subjective outlook on the world. Within the exclusively objective metaphysic of physicalism, this could not be the case. Their conception of what it means for something to *seem* to be the case, which is that the objective conditions for representing it to be the case are met, can only be true of conscious beings, for whom *a world is present*, if at least one element of the

representation is correct: namely that there is something that conscious beings are representing as ‘the presence of the world’. This cannot be something objective, otherwise this element of the representation would not be correct. The equivalent representation had by a non-conscious being could indeed be all wrong. ‘They’ could ‘token’ this representation in the ‘face of’ nothing at all.

My mistake was to overlook the metaphilosophical unity of anti-physicalism, and focus instead on the kind of metaphysical discussions that anti-physicalists can currently only presage. Within a metaphysic in which consciousness is assured, then I do indeed think it is considerably more sensible to distrust our conception of experience than our conception of matter. Revision is indeed required, to some extent, and I think physicalists have hit upon some sound insights in this area. But when revisionism is adopted simply in order to sure up the world-view of physicalism, which is the context in which I made my unfortunate statement, then there is no contest. Revise experience to make physicalism work, and consciousness disappears; so the result is the absurd spectacle of conscious people trying their damndest to genuinely believe that they are not conscious. If in order to avoid this outcome you feel the need to revise our conception of the objective world – by inserting some objective subjectivity into the middle of it – then that is obviously the way to go. I do not agree with this way of doing it, I do not think you have to do it, and I am quite sure that it is a dire mistake to call the result a new and improved form of ‘materialism’ – as Galen Strawson does (2008), but Goff does not, despite the affinity of their positions – but nevertheless, the outcome is what matters.

Now in a sense, I have already suggested my answer to the overarching concern of Goff’s paper, namely that there is a tension between my arguments against physicalist approaches to consciousness in Chapter 4 of *Meaningless*, and my positive account of consciousness in Chapter 5. When I am criticising physicalism, my point is that our conception of consciousness is much richer than physicalists can allow, since it conflicts with what they want to tell us consciousness really is. When I am subsequently presenting my own theory, I argue that this rich conception misrepresents the true reality of consciousness. What makes it coherent to argue in both of these ways is my view that the rich misrepresentation does not have it *completely* wrong: for it is a conception of *something*. For physicalists, however, it must be completely wrong: a conception of nothing at all. This is entirely in line with my general view that we cannot positively characterise transcendent reality, but nevertheless cannot deny its

reality. Compare, for instance, my argument in Chapter 6 that we have a transcendent notion of ‘now’, which inserts us into the flow of time, but which creates nothing but illusion when we try to make sense of it with the only substantive resources we have, namely those of objective thought. This was the direction of travel in the chapters on consciousness.

Physicalists, before they reach the inevitable, eliminative terminus of their position – a terminus most remain unaware of – want our conception of consciousness to be anodyne, not rich, because then they have a chance of arguing that the anodyne features it ascribes latch onto something physical. I argued that as a matter of fact, our conception is not anodyne, but rather squarely incompatible with physicalism. But when physicalists do reach the eliminative terminus, it becomes irrelevant to them how rich our conception of consciousness is, because now they have seen the implication of their position that it is an entirely illusory conception. They are wrong, however, because it must at least refer to something, given that we are all here, thinking the matter over. Within my own account, I accept that the objective world is centreless, as the eliminativists recognise, together with the fact that our conception of consciousness is a conception of something, which the eliminativists try in vain to dispute – and this leaves me at liberty to reflect on the erroneous nature of the rich conception we possess. Rich and erroneous for the same reason: namely that it derives from objective thought, which is rich and centreless.

Although I think concepts of conscious experiences are rich misrepresentations, the accurate representation at the heart of them can be thought of as ‘blind-pointer-type concepts’, as Goff puts it (p. 25). Goff thinks I reject all such concepts in Chapter 4 and then end up re-affirming them in Chapter 5. This is what he says,

In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke claims that proper names refer in virtue of a causal connection between the name and the referent, rather than in virtue of an associated description. A school child can refer to ‘Galileo’ without knowing anything about him (perhaps they mistakenly think he was a famous explorer), which shows that they can’t be picking him out in terms of any of his characteristics. The child manages to pick out Galileo because they use a term, i.e. ‘Galileo’, which is causally connected in the right kind of way with Galileo himself. This story seems to me fairly plausible, and it suggests that the concept expressed by a proper name is a kind of blind



pointer.

I think it's better to say, not that there are *no* blind-pointer-type concepts, but simply that it's pretty implausible that experiential concepts are blind-pointer-type concepts. When I think about pain in terms of how it feels, I know something about its essential nature. That's what prompts my concern when others feel pain; I know what pain is, and hence I know it's a terrible thing to endure. We might bolster this claim with reference to Tartaglia's claim that we characterise experiences as self-aware states: to characterise a state as self-aware is to have a positive conception of it, not just to blindly point at it. (pp. 24-5)

I have been deeply suspicious of Kripke's causal theory of reference ever since I read Rorty's critique of it (Rorty 1979: chapter 6; esp. pp. 284-95). To have a conception of something is to have a way of thinking about it. If a child thinks Galileo was a famous explorer, and nothing more, does the child have a way of thinking about that man? It seems to me that they know the name, but not what it stands for; and hence that they cannot have acquired a way of thinking about what it stands for. Since others know the name too, the child can use it to refer to Galileo; when the child says the name, others start thinking about Galileo according to their own conceptions of him. But the child has a conception of a famous explorer called 'Galileo', and there was no such person. Causal links within society may explain the child's ability to use that name to refer to Galileo, but they cannot provide the child with a way of thinking about somebody they know nothing about. The causal links are epistemically nothing to the child; and the child's ability to make a certain sound provides them with no cognitive grasp on the nature of the object that the sound conventionally stands for either.

The reason I do not think this child has a blind-pointer-type-concept, is that they *do* have an idea of what they want to point to; and it is wrong. No doubt they also want to point to the standard bearer of the name (that is why it is wrong), but they lack the cognitive resources to do so. If they try *on their own* to think about Galileo, then they fail, by thinking about some explorer. (Perhaps 'some man in the olden days called "Galileo"' is good enough, but I am inclined to think that the more explicit content cancels this out; and in any case, you could easily adjust the example.) Thus it seems natural to me to say that they lack a concept of Galileo. The case of experiential concepts is different, however, because what we are trying to think about is right up against our faces, so to speak. We are trying to

think about *that*. In such cases, we cannot fail to have concepts of something which we are trying to make sense of with the concepts. These concepts are rich, so the pre-eliminative physicalist positions cannot be right. But they have blind-pointer-type-concepts at their heart, surrounded by the rich misrepresentation that makes the concepts useful to us, so the eliminative physicalist position cannot be right either.

The main point of contention between Goff and myself is over the question of whether our rich conceptions of conscious states get them right or not; he thinks they do and I do not. As he neatly puts it, the issue is over the ‘epistemic priority of phenomenal properties over external properties’ or *vice versa* (p. 27). For me, phenomenal concepts are shadows of concepts of external properties, but Goff thinks it can be the other way around. In response to my arguments that whenever we form a positive, phenomenal conception of our experiences, we end up relying upon features from the objective world which experiences cannot possess, he says that,

Phenomenal colour and phenomenal shape *represent* their external analogues: when I see a tomato I have an experience which represents a red, round thing at a certain distance from me. But I see no reason to doubt that there is ‘mental paint’ doing the representing, mental paint with an intrinsic character known through introspection. We call a certain intrinsic property of experience ‘phenomenal colour’ because it represents phenomenal colour, and another intrinsic property of experience ‘phenomenal shape’ because it represents phenomenal shape. (p. 26)

He supports this with the suggestion that my case draws support from an equivocation over the meaning of ‘objective’: ‘Experiences are not “objective” in the sense that they are subjective properties, i.e. properties which characterise the subjective experience of an individual. But they are perfectly “objective” in the sense that the facts about experience are perfectly objective facts about reality’ (p. 28).

I take the point that if there were subjective properties captured by phenomenal concepts, then they would be just as objective as everything else, in the sense that within any given time-slice of reality, subjective properties would number among the properties that exist. But that is not how I use ‘objective’, because I do not find the terminology useful in this context. Used in this way,

‘objective’ means something like ‘independently existing’; but then it cannot quite mean that because the existence of subjective properties depends on a subject experiencing them – unless you are the kind of panpsychist who denies this. And since you might reasonably think that no *property* exists independently, you may as well just say that subjective properties *exist*. So rather than unnecessarily muddy the waters, when I say ‘objective’, I mean having the properties characteristic of physical objects, such as size, shape, colour, density, and so on, plus the less obvious characteristics which science invokes to better explain them.

Now I perfectly understand, I think, where Goff is coming from on this issue of epistemic priority. He thinks that conscious experience is our epistemic point of contact with the world, and that it was on the basis of the ‘mental paint’ of consciousness that we drew up our more abstract conceptions of size, shape and other external qualities. In a sense, then, I am bound to agree; I defend an indirect conception of perceptual experience. However, it seems to me that our original experience of the world was just that: of the world. We thought of our conscious experience as trees, animals, etc., and formed conceptions of *those things*. Developing such conceptions has ultimately led to the incredibly rich picture of an objective world which we now have. Reflection, however, taught us that this completely transparent conception of experience is *philosophically* naïve and unsustainable, and that to produce a coherent and complete picture of reality, which includes many ‘things’ we experience which are not things at all, we need to think of the things we conceive of objectively as external causes of the states of conscious experience which represent them. We needed an indirect conception of experience, to account for both the existence of experience and its causal integration with the world. But when we try to conceive the experiences themselves, and not just what they are experiences of, we have no new concepts to hand. We have to employ the concepts we developed for making sense of the external world; and when we look at the phenomenal concepts we actually have, it seems to me that this is exactly what we find.

When we started saying that sounds were vibrations in the air, or that colours were light-reflectancies of surfaces, I do not think we were overlooking the mental paint, and trying to pretend it does not exist in the service of an impoverished, purely extrinsic conception of reality, as I think Goff does. There is definitely something to this, in the sense that we favoured anything that fitted our scientific theories, and looked away from the rest. But what I think was really happening is that we were refining our objective conceptions. We always thought, except in our

philosophical moments, that the sound, e.g., was ‘something out there’; and we found a better way of describing what it was. It was a description of the ‘mental paint’, except we were not thinking of it as mental, but rather external. When the philosophical need to describe what independently exists arose, we realised that the vibrations in the air could only be the causes of internal experience. But when we came to describe that internal experience, we had no new resources. All we could do was fall back on the less objectively accurate concepts we had before – ‘the sound of a trumpet’, rather than ‘certain vibrations in the air’, for instance – and then assure ourselves that the former, and not the latter, captured the phenomenal nature of the experience. We knew experience could not be nothing at all and we felt we should be able to say something about it; so we enlisted the older objective concepts and started talking about phenomenal ineffability.

If we ‘call a certain intrinsic property of experience “phenomenal colour” because it represents phenomenal colour,’ then we end up with the mental paint representing itself; physicalists typically find themselves relying on this kind of idea too. It strikes me as untenable, since our notion of representation is of one thing representing another. More strongly, I think it is incoherent; and I have an analysis of where I think the deep-rooted incoherence lies (PML, chapter 7; esp. pp. 156-62). A much better plan, it seems to me, is to say that when we represent an experience as possessed of phenomenal colour, we represent it in accordance with the way we represent things in the objective world. The incoherence is still there, because we do also represent experiences as self-aware; but now that we are explaining a feature of misrepresentation, rather than a supposed feature of reality, it no longer matters.

Further light is shed on our disagreement about epistemic priority, when Goff says,

It is a familiar point that experiential qualities are in some sense ineffable. But this is plausibly due to the fact that the concepts we use to pick them out are primitive. Compare to other plausibly primitive concepts: existence, metaphysical possibility, causation, the notion of a reason. It is arguable that none of these notions can be explained in more basic terms.

He goes on to say that,

The nature is known, but it is known only through actually having the

experience itself. If you have to ask, you'll never know. (pp. 27-8)

‘What is swing?’ Fats Waller was once asked, and his reply was: ‘Lady, if you have to ask, don’t fool with it!’ (Terkel 2002: 72). Ned Block once attributed a similar line to Louis Armstrong, related it to the ineffability of phenomenal consciousness, and it subsequently went viral in philosophy; Goff was giving it a nod with his final sentence above. Well, if the lady in question did have to ask, then Fats was surely right that swinging was never going to be her thing. But although musicians who know how to swing are unlikely to know how they do it, that does not mean nothing can be said about it. I can swing; and although I do not know much about it (except in the ability sense), I do know a little. A lot of it comes down to adjusting the lengths of the quavers in accordance with the tempo; in jazz, contiguous pairs of these are, as a rule of thumb, divided two-thirds to one-third, but when the tempo goes up, this gradually gets closer to half and half. There is a lot more to it than that, of course, and you do not need to know even this to instinctively swing (thank God). But my point is that an awful lot could be said about it, and no doubt already has. In principle, you could take the styles of the greatest swingers apart, and show exactly what they are doing in excruciatingly dull detail.

The situation with phenomenal consciousness is not remotely like this, so I do not think the analogy is a good one. Neither do I think it a tactically good idea for anti-physicalists to rely on ineffability intuitions; they are an obvious weak point, and quite unnecessary – not to mention misleading, to my mind. It is not that there is no need to get explicit about phenomenal consciousness and that it is better that we do not, as is the case with swing. The fact is that we simply cannot get explicit about it without talking in terms we have evidently borrowed from the objective world. The colour was really intense, says the introspector; the light was really intense, says the scientist, etc. That we can get explicit right up until the point at which we feel the need to say something *different* about phenomenal colour to what we say about objective colour, strongly suggests to me that we are not dealing with one of Goff’s primitive concepts. Now you could think it is the other way around, in that our conceptions of the objective world come from our conceptions of experiences. And in terms of the metaphysics of what is actually going on, on both my account and Goff’s, it amounts to the same thing in at least the following sense: that we are conceptualising the same thing, whether we take ourselves to be conceptualising consciousness itself or the world which it makes

us aware of. However, it is not the same in the sense of what we take ourselves to be conceptualising; and outside of philosophy, it seems clear to me that we have taken ourselves to be conceptualising the world – which is why we have been so successful in developing the concepts of objective thought. In this sense, then, they are concepts of external properties, and hence this is where the epistemic priority lies.

Various considerations convince me that this is the right order of priority, but the main one is the need to account for the ‘split-level’ nature of consciousness. The idea, which I learnt from J. J. Valberg’s ‘horizontal’ conception of consciousness (Valberg 2007), is that consciousness places us within a world from the perspective of which whatever reality there is to consciousness itself is to be found outside of that world. I do not think that Russellian monism, dualism, or any of the other alternatives to physicalism, outside of idealist and phenomenological traditions, account for that insight; an insight which I think is entirely sound. Once you accept it, it makes perfect sense that concepts of what appear within consciousness will have epistemic priority; Valberg himself does not even allow for specifically phenomenal concepts of that which appears within consciousness, but I do think we have them – as shadows (see my exchange with Valberg; this symposium). Once you look at things this way, then there is no longer see any reason to entertain doubts about the picture of the world-within-consciousness which objective thought presents. Objective concepts are fine for objective purposes, and the fact that when you try to make a metaphysic out of this world you will find no room for conscious experience, is exactly what you would expect; the main problem for physicalist metaphysics is predicted and explained, without the need to criticise objective thought itself. And for all Goff says about Russellian Monism not being in competition with science (pp. 31-2) – which I accept – I still think that to say that science leaves out the intrinsic nature of the matter it describes, sounds like a criticism. On my view, describing matter is their business alone; metaphysically interpreting that description is ours.

Now add in some metaphilosophical considerations about the connection between consciousness and transcendence, which I think explain why the issue has attracted so much philosophical attention, and which ties it in with a plausible account of philosophical inquiry in general. Add in the straightforward plausibility of the idea that the independent nature of reality outruns any description human beings can give of it, except when we retreat to some of the emptiest concepts we have, which lack the detail, and hence usefulness, of the

objective thought we developed because of its usefulness. Put all of that together, and I think we have an attractive package. Goff's alternative has a powerful idea behind it which I cannot lay claim to, namely that objective thought is merely extrinsic and relational, thereby leaving an obvious gap when it comes to the intrinsic. But all things considered, I think that extrinsic characterisation is all we can do when we want to say something substantive – basically, relate things to each other; and Goff's appeal to ineffability confirms me in this view. The intrinsicality gap is a natural enough place to insert the fact that we are conscious. But if you do it this way, you do not account for the distinctive structure of conscious experience, and end up placing consciousness in the objective world, rather than the objective world within consciousness; from the introspective perspective we must apply to think about consciousness, this is clearly the wrong way around. Consciousness ends up ineffable, but also extremely well-known to us, such that despite the fact that we know it spatially, for instance, we cannot employ this spatial knowledge to say the substantive things we normally would, e.g. that the experience is large with rounded edges. Better to leave objective thought alone, I think, while granting that it provides us with useful misrepresentations when we need to talk about individual experiences.

Goff asks,

Why do I need to make sense of experience in terms of objective thought? Why can't I form a perfectly adequate conception just by conceiving of my experience in terms of what it's like to have it? It seems that I can entertain the possibility of solipsism – the hypothesis that all that exists is myself and my mental properties – and in doing so I think about my experience without bringing in the idea of anything from the external world. Why is this not a perfectly adequate conception of my own experiences? (pp. 29-30)

I agree that you could, but your conceptions of your own experiences will have to be rooted in the idea that it is *as if* they were caused by external conditions. Otherwise you will not be able to make sense of their succession. As such, you will be leaning on objective thought. You may disavow it, by saying that it is only *as if* your blue experience has rounded edges; as everyone does when they turn to the phenomenal conception. But since you will not be able to say anything positive about the blueness itself, and anything substantive you might want to say, such as about what seems to cause the blue experience, will be disavowed, then

everything that makes your conception adequate is being disavowed. Such a disavowal strikes me as hollow, unless made within a context which explains the status of objective thought within the context of consciousness, and thereby explains why we cannot say anything positive about the blueness itself.

Goff goes on to point out an affinity between the Phenomenal Concept Strategy and my take on both Jackson's Mary-in-the-room and the Farrell / Nagel bat. I very nearly passed over these examples, which have been unremittingly flogged for decades, on the grounds that they have clearly failed to do their job, and hence are very unlikely to ever do so now; but I am glad I did not, given that what I said caught Goff's attention. He is right about the affinity; I spent so long trying to work out what was wrong with the Phenomenal Concept Strategy, that I eventually found the positive aspect within it that had maintained my attention. The Strategy appeals to physicalists, because it shows them a way to use Kripke's causal theory to argue that phenomenal concepts are blind demonstratives; being blind, they could refer to anything whatsoever, which is just what the physicalist needs. I affirm this aspect of the view, like them, to explain why Mary learns something new when she leaves the black-and-white room, and why we do not know what it is like to be a bat. To this, Goff understandably asks, 'Given that Tartaglia also thinks of experiential concepts as demonstratives which leave us in the dark about the nature of experience, how can he be so confident that experience doesn't have a purely physical nature?' (pp. 30-1).

I have already answered this: the reason I can be so confident, is that if experience did have a purely physical nature, then it would be objective, and so no experiential field would open up from individual, subjective perspectives, such that our blind demonstratives have something to hit. No introspective demonstrative reference would be taking place; rather Mary, or the bat, would just be making noises – or computing in a manner appropriate to the emission of such noises. Consciousness would not present a world; rather an objective world would simply exist. And unless consciousness presents a world, our awareness of this fact cannot lead us to form the metaphysical intention to refer to the ultimate nature of that presentation, thereby making the demonstratives a little less blind.

By leaning on objective thought, we form phenomenal concepts of distinct, individual experiences. Reflection on the transcendence of consciousness teaches us both that these concepts cannot be capturing their real natures, and that they must have a real nature. We point outside the horizon of consciousness, just as within a dream we might point outside of the dream to where the real existence



lies. We know that our conceptions formed within the context of consciousness cannot capture what we are pointing at, but we also know that these conceptions are of *different* experiences, because leaning on objective thought distinguishes them for us. Since objective thought cannot capture the demonstrate component, learning about what it has to say cannot provide us with these concepts; so when we gain one, we learn something new: what it is like. What we learn may be entirely illusory outside the context of consciousness – we have no reason to think that we are marking real distinctions, although I grant that it is very tempting to think this – but *within* the context, we learn something both practically informative, and philosophically, highly suggestive.

Goff closes his paper by pointing out how very quick my rejection of dualism is, and how it presupposes the standard ‘causal closure’ line of physicalists. About this, he says,

If the physical world is causally closed, then there is no space for the mind to do any causal work by making changes in the brain. However, although often stated the causal closure of the physical is not often defended with empirical argument. It would be nice to hear a little bit more from Tartaglia of the case for causal closure. (p. 32)

He is quite right. The closure argument is far from water-tight, and I have nothing to say in response to the sophisticated objections that have been brought against it by Goff and others. My stance towards the causal closure argument is rather apathetic: I am prepared to give that one to the physicalists – although Goff may well be right that anti-physicalists should not. The reason for my apathy is that I am already convinced, from reflection on the structure of consciousness, that the right place to look for consciousness is not the objective world. As such, I have no reason to suspect that objective thought would *not* be capable of describing a perfectly closed system; except for general suspicion about the limitations of science, which seems less compelling with each passing decade.

The closure argument would, if it were any good, reinforce my view that interactionist dualism makes a similar mistake to physicalism; inserting consciousness into the objective order, and thereby becoming forced to say that the brain is metaphysically special, rather than an ordinary object. But then, I would think that anyway. What really interests me is the fact that it is the *main* argument which physicalism relies upon. And yet it only has any force against

interactionist dualism. My tactic was to point out that since I am not an interactionist dualist – and the vast majority of anti-physicalists, past and present, have not been – then I simply do not care about that argument. They can have it; if it works, it can only reinforce what I am saying. If I keep saying things like this, and Goff continues to make the case that even *this* argument – the one which is supposed to provide the physicalist’s strongest ground – is actually a rather dubious article of faith, then we will have a classic pincer movement going on.

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## Nothing but Nihilism?

### The Spirit of Purposelessness in James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*

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#### Abstract

This appreciative inquiry of James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* examines the case Tartaglia makes for the meaninglessness of life *itself* (as opposed to particular purposeful activities *within* life), and asks whether it is still possible for modern persons to entertain a notion of meaning that does not stem from human purpose and decision alone. Does meaning only reside in the purposes humans choose and the activities they invent, or can human beings experience the enveloping universe as itself responsive to the human quest for meaning? Taking up the work of Victor Frankl, this essay explores the latter possibility, in sympathy with Tartaglia's resistance to quick and easy impositions of all-too-human meaning on the transcendent context of life *itself*.

## I. Philosophical Pluralism and the Question of the Meaning of Life

When the editors at the *Journal of the Philosophy of Life* invited me to contribute an essay to this special issue on James Tartaglia's most recent book, I was both honoured and happy to accept. I had appreciated Tartaglia's helpful and insightful commentary on Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and was curious to discover what sort of original philosophical contribution he would provide outside the format of a philosophical commentary.<sup>1</sup> Then I opened the .pdf file that the editors at Bloomsbury sent me and was greeted by the ominous title, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness, and Reality*. Since I'm one of those increasingly rare intellectuals who naively yet somehow confidently assumes that life is meaningful, even if we humans cannot provide a general definition of such meaning or otherwise provide for it on our own terms, I prepared myself for the worst. Would I be treated to yet another tiresome version of 'Ditchkinian' physicalist reductionism,

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<sup>1</sup> See James Tartaglia, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2007).

paternalistically explaining to me that there is nothing but atoms and the void, and that any non-scientific discourse claiming to find meaning in human existence is nothing more than fanciful human projection? Or would I get the ‘accomplished’ Nietzschean version, in which we humans, mere floating specks in a vast universe that cares nothing for our existence, may connect to nothing more ultimate than our own will-to-power?

Although Tartaglia’s version of nihilism more closely resembles the ‘accomplished’ Nietzschean version, ultimately the book pursues neither of the aforementioned directions (while also appreciating and learning from them). Instead, he takes the reader on a whirlwind philosophical tour through which he lays out his own unique and highly interesting take on nihilism. Along the way, we are also treated to some first-rate and deeply rewarding philosophy of mind, including intriguing treatments of such themes as consciousness, time, universals, and transcendence. Through his exploration of these themes, Tartaglia seeks to convince his reader that the relative purposefulness we experience through the daily activities we pursue within the framework of ordinary life provides us with meaning enough, and the fact that we cannot specify an analogous purpose or meaning for life *itself* need not bother us very much.<sup>2</sup> He even hints, toward the book’s end, that our inability to ascribe an overall meaning to life *itself* can in fact encourage an edifying form of spiritual comportment to the very fact of our existence, wherein our anxiety to impose meaning on life *itself* finally comes to be stilled (not answered), thereby providing a measure of existential comfort.

But before jumping to the end of the book, I need to say more about the way in which Tartaglia argues for life’s meaninglessness. I will do so in the next section. After that, I will finally turn my attention to some of the spiritual concerns Tartaglia’s position raises for me, and indeed for himself (if the book’s conclusion is any indication). At this point, however, I would like to head off a potential misunderstanding: Simply because, as I described above, I consider myself to be an intellectual who somehow naively assumes life *itself* to have meaning, I would hate for anyone to conclude from this admission that my reaction to Tartaglia’s work must be fundamentally hostile, and that I therefore plan to engage in some form of more or less veiled polemics. To the contrary, I have struggled with Tartaglia’s position and have taken it seriously as a possible and defensible answer

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<sup>2</sup> See James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 24–25. Further citations will be quoted parenthetically within the text.

to the big questions he asks. I have let his version of nihilism trouble my sleep. I have done so not simply to strengthen my position by exposing it to a strong contrast case, but also because, at the end of the day, I do not think that there exists any knock-down *philosophical* refutation of Tartaglia's position, and I respect the intellectual honesty that has led him to it.<sup>3</sup>

What I do spy in Tartaglia's position concerning nihilism, however, is that he might not grant the same quarter to my spiritual position with respect to the question of life's meaning (which I will reveal in due time), and would thus be less tolerant of a measure of philosophical pluralism when it comes to answering this question. Here I locate a productive tension between us that might help shed further light on the big questions that form the subject matter of this book. My hunch is that a greater tolerance of pluralism can open up dialogical space and a search for common understanding, if not common ground. Trying my level best to steer clear of polemic, then, I will take the opportunity this examination affords to consider ways in which the assumption of meaning to life *itself* could still look like a tenable position, even in modernity, in ways that perhaps Tartaglia has yet to consider fully or otherwise address. What I have found interesting and even surprising, given the difference between our positions, is the way that both of them eventuate in comparable (but of course not exactly similar) forms of attentive, if not receptive, spiritual comportment to human life in a world that transcends it. Of course, this spiritual resonance, however deep, still resides in the context of a difference that makes a difference. Nevertheless, I maintain that it presents real common ground upon which to continue a communal conversation.

One final word of caution: In this brief examination, I will remain relatively silent on many of the book's more fine-tuned arguments concerning the transcendence of human consciousness and self-aware experience from the objective or material world, the human consciousness of time, and the human ability to conceive the world in terms of universals. These are all fascinating discussions, and I'm still not sure that I have understood all the nuances of the arguments contained therein, and so I will leave it to others more capable than

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<sup>3</sup> My position here perhaps resembles Paul Ricoeur's response to Nietzsche's doctrine of the innocence of becoming: "Confronted with this hard doctrine, I by no means intend to prove or refute it, nor do I intend to put it in the service of some clever apologetics and thereby convert it into Christian faith. I must rather leave it where it is, in a place where it remains alone and perhaps out of reach, inaccessible to any form of repetition. It maintains itself in this place as my most formidable adversary, as the measure of radicality against which I must measure myself. Whatever I think and whatever I believe must be worthy of it." See "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 458.

myself to unpack them. Instead, I here take the risk of addressing my attention primarily to the beginning and end of the book, and so of neglecting somewhat the connecting parts in the middle. My justification for so doing, such as it is, is a felt need, as my discussion above already indicates, to take a high altitude view of Tartaglia's project; for questions about what meaning itself *is*, and whether or not anything like it can be ascribed to life *itself*, are large ones, the biggest questions we can in fact ask. It is at this high-altitude level, then, that I begin to engage with Tartaglia's project.

## **II. Purposeless Life as the Framework for Relative Meaning**

As beings who ultimately pursue a meaningless life, humans are, to say the least, curious creatures. Together, over time and not without an enormous amount of violence and agonism, but also cooperation, we have developed cultures and civilizations that provide us with models for living together, roles to perform, and tasks to carry out. This feature of our existence provides us with goals and purposes, and these serve to provide relative meaning to the various and sundry activities we undertake to achieve them, as well as criteria by which to measure our success in so doing. In Tartaglia's words, human culture and civilization thus provide everyday life with a "framework," one that gives meaning to the activities that take place within it, and a sense of identity to those who perform them. "Within the framework ... we can tread a more or less beaten path through our lives, and are thereby provided with rules and objectives for living. In this way, life takes on the character of a game: a highly flexible and complex game, of course, but nevertheless an activity we can join in with others, and perhaps at the end, look back to evaluate how well we did" (23).

For humans, Tartaglia notes, this framework is not simply the framework of biological imperatives that we share with other animals. Our framework is more than simply biological because, unlike non-human animals, our lives are not constituted by biological imperatives alone. Whereas we would have good cause to ask what has gone wrong when an animal has stopped mating or eating for no discernible biological reason, we do not normally draw the same conclusion when a human being takes a vow of chastity or goes on a hunger strike (23). For Tartaglia, examples like this show us that human beings "have broken free of the biological framework in which their ancestors lived," so much so that it is more accurate to describe the human framework as a "social framework" (23). Tartaglia

goes so far as to suggest that our biological imperatives have been socialized to the extent that even the imperative to satisfy our desire to eat, although not something we invented or gave to ourselves, “can only govern our behaviour if we choose to play along.” Following this line of thinking to its logical end, he concludes that our freedom “to put even biological imperatives aside serves as a reminder that for the modern human being, all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life” (23).

The social framework we inhabit from day to day thus tells us some specific things about what is unique to the human form of life. For starters, when we consider the framework, we see that, unlike life *itself*, the activities and purposes that populate it are in some sense things that we ourselves have invented and chosen. While these activities and goals depend on the interpretation we give to them, life *itself* would continue to exist in the absence of such interpretation: “Once the interpretation is in place, activities have a purpose within life, just as chess moves have a purpose within the game, and the game has a purpose within life; but in all these cases the purpose is made up within a life that has no purpose of its own” (23). Life *itself* has no purpose because, as that which gives the framework in which we create all of our cultural inventions, it is something that we ourselves did not invent, and so it is something to which we could never ascribe, and upon which we could never impose, a purpose.

For Tartaglia, all meaning is relative to the framework, and that which gives the framework, life, is meaningless *itself*. On this understanding, human meaning is intimately related to human making. This understanding of meaning allows Tartaglia to claim, as we saw above, that “all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life” (23). Whatever or whomever it is that constitutes life, it is not us. As alive, we find ourselves to be merely the recipients of life, albeit a unique form of life that has evolved the freedom to impose socially constructed purposes upon that which we did not ourselves constitute. These purposes, Tartaglia goes on to describe, “have been made up anonymously over the course of history, as people living together in communities, guided by evolving conceptions of what constitutes a good life and how best to achieve it, have established patterns of behaviour with criteria of success and failure” (23). We see the difference between life *itself* and the human form of life that is only able to impose relative meaning and purpose upon it, once we consider the fact that, even if we suspended all our culturally prescribed activities within the framework, life *itself* would not cease: “It would remain, its

pointlessness rendered more perspicuous” (23).

One might wish to ask an epistemological question at this point, concerning how Tartaglia considers it possible for us to perform such a thought experiment in the first place. That is, how are we able to imagine the total suspension of everyday life practices, and thereby notice the way in which, in that situation, life *itself* would be seen to lack any point or purpose? In order for this thought experiment to succeed, would we not have to retain, rather than suspend, one last practice, i.e., the practice of judging the presence or absence of purposes? And wouldn't the need to simultaneously retain and suspend that practice show the impossibility of ascribing *either* meaning *or* meaninglessness to life *itself*? My point is that, if any judgment concerning the *meaning* or *meaninglessness* of life *itself* can only come into view upon the suspension of all purposeful human practices, and yet the act of judging is part of the parcel of those practices to be suspended, then under such a requirement one would never be able to come to one conclusion or its opposite, because one would not be able to engage in the practice of judging. It seems rather facile to conclude that life *itself* refuses to answer a question that no one can ever ask (under the requirement of this thought experiment); in the absence of a prior question, or anyone who could ask it, how or why should life *itself* supply an answer?

For now, however, we may put aside this epistemological quibble, for the inherent problems of Tartaglia's counterfactual thought experiment do not really present insuperable obstacles to his overall program. That is, the weight of his thesis does not hang upon the thought experiment's possibility, even if the way he poses it reveals some of his more important philosophical assumptions. The point he is really making is that we have no reason to believe that life *itself* would not continue if humans stopped being the free, socially constructive animals that we are. Counterfactually imagining a human witness to this situation, Tartaglia believes, renders the meaninglessness of life *itself* salient; by entertaining the absence or ceased existence of the activity of the meaning-giving creature—the socially-constituted human animal—one demonstrates the inaptness of searching for some 'point to it all', one akin to the relative purposefulness of everyday life. For, in this scenario, the purposefulness of ordinary life would no longer exist, and so could not be used to measure the meaning of life itself.

Closer to the main thrust of his argument, Tartaglia thinks he can account *positively*, and not just negatively, for our ability to judge in favour of life's overall meaninglessness, even in the midst of our purpose-filled, everyday lives. As it



turns out, humans are not just beings who exist within the everyday framework, but also beings who are able to transcend and thus suspend this framework in various ways. In moments of reflection, for example, we are able to look objectively at life as a whole. In thought, we are able to suspend our engagement with the framework, an ability, Tartaglia explains, we have evolved “to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another” (25). Unlike other animals, Tartaglia says, humans have evolved a degree of freedom with respect to their situation, through which they can choose which paths to follow in life, even changing them midcourse. As Bruce Springsteen reminds us, you can have a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack, and then one day simply decide to go out for a ride and never go back. For Tartaglia, our freedom to make such shifts, to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another, demonstrates our ability to suspend framework engagement *as such*.

This significant feature of human existence, our evolved freedom to transcend the framework and reflect upon it, naturally leads us to entertain questions concerning the meaning of life *itself*, the point or goal of the entire framework as such, and not just the meaning of the various activities we pursue together within it. Equally naturally, we are tempted to think that the meaning of life *itself* must be something analogous to the meaning of our goal-oriented activities within the framework it provides. Just as these latter have a point that gives them meaning, so must the former. Yet when we transcend the framework, he says, we neither discover nor discern any *overall* purpose to life itself, one that would give it meaning in the same way that, say, nourishing our bodies gives the activities of farming, hunting, and eating meaning: “[O]ur collective movements have created the context in which individual movements are understood as meaningful, but there is no wider context in which life itself can be understood as meaningful” (25).

In order for us to attribute meaning to that which gives the framework, life *itself*, we must not only be able to transcend the framework, but also discern features of this new meta-context that would give *it* overall meaning. That is, this meta-context could not be any old context, but must rather be a context *of meaning*. “The idea of a further context of meaning beyond the framework, then, is the idea that life itself might be placed in a context of meaning; and if there were such a context, this might provide our various activities within life with a further significance” (48). Tartaglia argues, however, that any sort of meaning analogous to the kind we ascribe to activities within the framework is precisely

what this meta-context *itself* lacks (49), because we have no good reason to believe that it is itself a context *of meaning*. We know that the framework rests within the context of the physical universe, for example, but it is a leap beyond the available facts to presume that this context is a context *of meaning*, or that the physical universe itself is nestled within a further transcendent context *of meaning* (50).

While Tartaglia admits that we have no grounds to rule out the existence of such a transcendent context of meaning—because, he says, “we have no grounds to suppose that only meaningless existence could provide the final context of existence”—he nevertheless argues that “we have no good reason to believe in it either” (52). While we cannot rule out the *possibility* of the existence of such a context, there is nothing we can do to establish that possibility either. “All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*” (52). The real significance of the very notion of a transcendent hypothesis *of meaning*, Tartaglia says, is not the challenge it presents to nihilism, “but rather that it provides us with an idea of what would be required for nihilism to be false; an idea which is deeply rooted in our intellectual history, which is made tangible by our experience, and which people might understandably want to be true” (53). Wishful thinking, however, is no basis upon which to insist on as dubious a posit as the existence of a transcendent context of meaning.

Yet even if we cannot in good intellectual conscience affirm the existence of such a context, we still need to come to terms with our ability to transcend the framework and view it as a whole (and thus entertain the question of the meaning of that whole). Precisely because of this ability, Tartaglia sees the emergence of two other features of everyday existence that bear witness to the meaninglessness of life *itself*. In particular, he points to what he describes, in Heideggerian fashion, as the “attunements” of anxiety and boredom. He describes these as attunements, rather than simply as moods, “because they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole” (26). *Pace* Heidegger, Tartaglia maintains that both anxiety and boredom attest to the truth of nihilism, because they are attunements we naturally fall into once we transcend and thus suspend our ongoing activity within the framework. Both attunements are “appropriate responses to an existence which requires action because it is temporal, but does not require any *particular* action because it is meaningless” (26). Our freedom to transcend the framework and view all the moves within it as somehow optional is akin to our freedom to suspend the rules of a game like chess.

The moment we realize that nothing more ultimate than the conventionally interpreted rules of the game prevents us from moving the pieces in any direction or not at all, an infinite array of possibilities starts to loom. Our first response to such looming infinite possibility is anxiety—for, in the absence of any conventional rules, how shall we decide which to pursue? Finally this anxiety subsides into boredom, as the realization finally sinks in that it would be ultimately pointless to pursue any at all. Whether through reflection, anxiety, or boredom, then, our ability to transcend and suspend framework activity ultimately discloses the meaninglessness of life *itself*: “When we disengage in this way, either deliberately for the purposes of philosophy, or passively when we fall into anxiety or boredom, then previously unquestioned and all-consuming goals emerge in a new light: as optional and ultimately pointless” (27).

I pause here to ask whether anxiety and boredom are the only human attunements with a significant bearing on the question of the meaning of life, or if Tartaglia emphasizes them to the exclusion of others because of the privileged relationship they have to the nihilistic answer to this question. Are there other attunements, maybe even competing or contrasting ones, that would render the question less decidable and more ambivalent? I wonder, to take a few examples, where Tartaglia would place joy, wonder, or gratitude? Like anxiety and boredom, these too would seem to qualify as attunements on his definition, insofar as “they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole” (26). Since we are in Heideggerian territory here, I might point out that in section II of *Being and Time*, in his discussion of “anticipatory resoluteness,” Heidegger draws attention to joy as a “fundamental mood” that accompanies angst: “Together with the sober *Angst* that brings us before our individualized potentiality-of-being, goes the unshakable joy in this possibility. In it Da-sein becomes free of the entertaining ‘incidentals’ that busy curiosity provides for itself, primarily in terms of the events of the world.”<sup>4</sup> I mention Heidegger here not because he is an unassailable authority on this subject, but because Tartaglia seems to agree with him that our attunements are more than just subjective projections, but instead reveal something about our ontological situation, our being in relation to the world that surrounds and solicits us (even if the solicitation is more obvious in Heidegger’s case than in Tartaglia’s). Unlike Heidegger, however, Tartaglia thinks these attunements reveal only

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press, 1996), 286.

ultimate meaninglessness, and he thus refrains from locating ultimate meaning in anything at all, let alone something akin to Dasein's authentic seizing of possibility through its resolute being-towards-death.<sup>5</sup> The question remains, however, whether anxiety and boredom are the only possible "tunings" of our situation, or if there are other tunings just as legitimate that disclose different aspects of our ontological situation.

Focusing on the attuning clues of anxiety and boredom exclusively, Tartaglia purports to discover meaninglessness as a kind of empirical fact. He thus frames his position as a kind of neutral discovery (one whose ramifications, moreover, are far from being as dire as philosophers and others have traditionally feared). In order to arrive here, he realizes that he can only follow Heidegger so far, and must eventually reject key features of the latter's existential analytic of Dasein. The reason he must reject these features is because his position does not allow him to claim the same ontological significance for our everyday absorption in our projects as Heidegger does. Heidegger invests great significance in the fact that from the very first we find ourselves in a world where things matter for us or concern us. Although Heidegger argues that attunements like anxiety allow us to awaken from a sort of fallen absorption in the framework, from our routine adherence to the roles and assignments that have already been carved out and interpreted for us, so that we may eventually come to recognize and seize the possibility of choosing our own life projects, he still maintains that this awakening always (already) takes place within our careful and concerned being-in-the-world. While we may work upon and alter our everyday absorption, we never really transcend or escape it. For Tartaglia, on the other hand, the break from our absorption in the framework he describes is more radical. He ultimately rejects Heidegger's view that, although we can fall back from our engagements with the world, these engagements remain constitutive of our being. Instead, he insists that "falling back from our engagements—by viewing life as the ultimately pointless activity of bodies moving around and making noises—allows us to grasp something fundamental about our situation" (29). Tartaglia sees no reason to recognize anything more significant than temporal priority in the fact that existential absorption precedes philosophical reflection. What matters for him, rather, is the accomplishment that detached reflection represents. In thought, says Tartaglia, we have developed the ability to escape from the involved

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<sup>5</sup> For his treatment of Heidegger on these and other questions, see Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, 24–34.

understanding that Heidegger thinks we never truly escape, and this allows us to “look at our lives in detachment from the significance they normally have for us” (29).

Of course, as Tartaglia himself recognizes, Heidegger would conclude that Tartaglia’s interpretation of our ability to fall back from our framework engagement smacks far too much of Cartesian detachment, and thus significantly misinterprets our being-in-the-world. Firmly grasping this horn of the dilemma, Tartaglia responds that the Heideggerian prioritization of existential absorption over reflective detachment fails to register the significance of the scientific worldview that modern humans have achieved: “[A]lthough we spend most of our waking lives in concerned engagement with the world, withdrawing from these engagements has produced a scientific worldview capable of explaining many of the features of them, as well as many other features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement; and it is hard to see why temporal priority should be thought to take precedence over explanatory power” (30). Because “objective, scientific thinking provides a more comprehensive vocabulary for describing the world than the kind of understanding we have when engaged in the framework” (30), we have reason to take it seriously as indicating an answer to the question of the meaning of life *itself*, and thereby to question the derivative status to which Heidegger consigns it. By discovering and explaining “features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement,” the scientific worldview “allows us to view our lives within a wider, physical context from which we are able to see that there is no overall point to our activities” (30). When it comes to determining criteria for what makes a context ultimate, the wider and more impersonal the better, Tartaglia thinks, even if interpreting ultimacy in this way forces us to relativize the only context we know that, according to Tartaglia, is capable of providing life with any meaning at all.

With this all too brief summary of Tartaglia’s case for nihilism in hand, but with its rough contours in place, I now turn to some of the spiritual concerns it raises. In the next section, I will appeal to an extraordinarily influential modern treatment of the question of the meaning of life *itself*, Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*.<sup>6</sup> My intention in turning to this famous little book is not to produce some sort of philosophical trump card, but rather to see how Frankl’s alternative posture both compares to and resonates with Tartaglia’s nihilism. The

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<sup>6</sup> Victor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

comparison, it turns out, is highly illuminating, and even surprising in some ways. My destination will finally be Tartaglia's own admission, near the book's end, that embracing nihilism need not relegate us to a lonely and comfortless existence, devoid of any and all spiritual sense or answer to human spiritual longing. This admission comes as a sort of culmination to his struggle to come to terms with what he takes to be the legitimate and necessary question of the meaning of life, including the need to face the likelihood of a negative answer squarely, while refusing any wishful consolation from the various speculative traditions of religion and philosophy along the way. The manner in which Tartaglia articulates the residual spiritual sense of nihilism portrays far more than it explicitly says, and it is in the space of this 'more', finally, that I think Tartaglia's position discloses a modicum of spiritual solidarity with certain positions, like Frankl's, that offer the opposite answer to our shared question.

### **III. Spiritual Attunement and the Scientific Worldview**

As he builds his case for the meaninglessness of life *itself*, Tartaglia never doubts the legitimacy of the question. His project is not to answer the question of the *meaninglessness* of life, but rather to answer the question of the *meaning* of life, and the answer he purports to discover is that it has none. Although his negative answer to this question, that life *itself* has no meaning, point, or purpose, might tempt one to think he takes the question lightly, his respect for the question itself is on every page of the book. Because our framework-transcendence makes the question unavoidable, he recognizes the significance of the longstanding traditions of religion and philosophy that have attempted to address it (55). We moderns have come a long way, however, and with the ascendance of the scientific worldview we have finally come to see that the context that transcends the framework, the physical universe, is not a context of meaning, not a context that can provide any point or purpose to life in general or as a whole.

But do we really know that the context we enter when we transcend our framework is *only* a "physical" universe, one that does not give any meaning to life itself? Surely it is *also* physical, but why is it *only* physical? Tartaglia spends two chapters in the book explaining how it is that human beings are not *only* physical, and that our conscious awareness of our experience cannot be reduced to brain states or some other material level (see chapters 4 and 5). Yet, because "everything we know about on the basis of experience exists within the physical

universe,” and because the physical universe, as physical, fails to provide a context of *meaning*, the possibility of a wider context of meaning, he says, “might seem to be nothing more than an abstract possibility arrived at by a process of reasoning about what would be required if life were to have meaning” (50). And as it turns out, Tartaglia suggests, this is just how we have in fact arrived at the conviction that life is meaningful: because we thought it must be. Because we mistakenly considered such general meaning to be a necessary requirement of a tenable life, we assumed that such meaning must be there for us to discover. Speculative traditions of religion and philosophy have arisen and passed away, all to meet this demand. But the entire time prior to the rise of the scientific worldview, we had not yet developed the intellectual chops that now allow us to recognize that the physical universe is silent, especially where the question of the meaning of life is concerned.

Hearing only silence in response to his question, Tartaglia interprets its answer to be a resounding “no.” He would likely not put the matter this way. For him, when we look for a meaning to life itself, we simply don’t find one, and that puts the question to rest. Life *itself* is meaningless. But I still think this conclusion is an interpretive gesture, and not simply the neutral registering of simple fact, and that is why I would insist that, even if it is true that the transcending universe or cosmos responds only silently to our question, no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer “no.” To be sure, neither is it compatible with a definitive “yes.” Rather, I would construe the silence as a space we enter with our question, one in which we must tarry and listen, resisting any immediate and easy answers of either the “yes” or “no” variety. This space has perhaps what Heidegger calls a “resonance of silence” (*Gelaut der Stille*)<sup>7</sup>. I’m not sure if Tartaglia would be friendly to this suggestion, or if he would think affirming it leaves us in far too vague and mystical a place, so perhaps I can fill it in with greater definition, and for this I wish to turn to Frankl.

Frankl is an important historical witness to the human search for meaning because his reflections are borne in the crucible of unspeakable human suffering, a crucible in which one has been stripped of all framework engagements, not through free choice but through the external imposition of violent force. Surely this particular form of framework suspension would, as much or more than any other, put one in a position to reflect on the whole, the framework as such, life

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 207.

*itself*. Anyone asking the question of the meaning of life, then, cannot afford to ignore Frankl's witness; because, unless one has suffered this intensely (and thankfully not all of us have), one would, without such witness, be utterly unable to access the perspective, indeed the spiritual orientation, it affords.<sup>8</sup> Now, I would not to be misunderstood: many of those who survived this crucible or others akin to it have come away with a different answer to our question than Frankl has. I do not wish to gainsay the interpretation they have taken from their experience, or even their inability to make any sense of it at all. Indeed, at the end of the day, there is a profoundly inescapable senselessness to this kind of suffering, and—again—quick and easy attempts to stitch meaning from it are bound to fail. We must resist the temptation to do so.

At the same time, none of these worries robs Frankl's own reflections and perspective of their peculiar legitimacy either. Yet beyond merely pointing to his example as one that portrays the *possibility* of ascribing meaning to life *itself* in ways that Tartaglia might yet be moved to consider, Frankl's attempt is particularly apt for this discussion because of its own refusal to provide a quick and easy answer to the question, of the variety that Tartaglia says will never be forthcoming: "Long ago," Frankl tells his reader, "we had passed the stage of asking what was the meaning of life, a naive query which understands life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something of value."<sup>9</sup> Whatever meaning can be found here in this crucible of suffering, Frankl attests, must be different in kind than the sort of point and purpose that gives framework activities their meaning, and those who perform them their identity.

Frankl ultimately bears witness to a meaning disclosed *in* suffering (and, importantly, not the meaning *of* suffering, i.e., a meaning that would somehow justify its cruelty and uselessness). But in order to entertain the possibility of such meaning, one needs to adopt a paradigmatically different philosophical anthropology than the one Tartaglia assumes, wherein human beings are *not* the only and final meaning makers, beings who, as such, are unable to receive meaning from that which they did not themselves make (from sources like the physical universe, or life *itself*). But Frankl bears witness to just this possibility:

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this insight to Joseph Kirby, a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute for Christian Studies now under my supervision. I expect his forthcoming dissertation, *On the Origins of Nihilism and the Rhetoric of Moral Ontology*, to make a signal contribution to the very discussion about life's meaning that Tartaglia addresses in this book, and my own thoughts on this matter have benefitted greatly from his insights.

<sup>9</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 78.



Selected by the Nazis to perform punishing forced labour under conditions of extreme malnourishment, he nonetheless found it in himself to reflect on his severely depleted condition, and wonder if any meaning could be found in it. His answer is rather stunning, especially to one who has not endured this level of suffering: “I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious ‘Yes’ in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose.”<sup>10</sup>

Now, perhaps I have here jumped too quickly to Frankl’s ‘yes’, but it is really the way in which he interprets that ‘yes’ that is important for the comparison I would here make between it and Tartaglia’s ‘no’. The quickest shorthand for me to use to get at this comparison is to highlight a difference between ‘what’ and ‘that’ when it comes to how we think about the possibility of answering our question. That is, both Frankl and Tartaglia could likely agree that the ‘what’ question has no answer, at least not a general one applicable to everybody. But just because no everlasting or universally applicable answer to the question “what is the meaning of life” is forthcoming (such as *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*’s famously hilarious “42”), does not preclude us from asserting *that* it has meaning or is meaningful *itself* in some way unrelated to our imposition of ends, points, purposes. “[F]rom somewhere I heard a victorious ‘yes’,” Frankl tells us, intimating that this answer is not something wishfully and willfully imposed on reality, but instead a message that came to him from beyond the darkness of his miserable situation. He proceeds to tell us that this missive came in several forms: a light comes on in a distant farmhouse, piercing the grey gloom; his wife from whom he had been long separated, and who has likely already died, becomes palpably present to him; and finally, at that very moment, he tells us, “a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadfastly at me.”<sup>11</sup> Now, it could be that we moderns are no longer capable, or find it increasingly difficult, to be moved by this form of witness. Or, alternatively, this kind of witness could amount to little more than a highly sophisticated form of projection or wishful thinking. Even though I reject the latter conclusion, I cannot rule it out as demonstrably false. But

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 40. Again, I thank Joseph Kirby for impressing upon me the importance of the what/that distinction for this discussion.

at the very least Frankl's witness portrays a different relationship with the surrounding physical universe than the one that the scientific worldview discloses. His surroundings speak to him in surprising and compassionate ways.<sup>12</sup>

The difference I am trying to indicate here is the difference between thinking of the enveloping universe as something that somehow speaks to us, whether to issue a summons or to provide comfort and strength in the midst of suffering, or thinking of it as something that is mute and purposeless, because immune to our projections (however sympathetically one might interpret those). Tartaglia tells us that "some human desires—especially those for eternal life and universal justice—cannot be satisfied within *our* lives; whatever may happen in the future." Because of this limitation, he says, we turn to "a transcendent hypothesis of meaning" which, in offering up the prospect of securing a meaning for life "satisfies these desires already." Because these desires are eminently worthwhile in and of themselves, the transcendent hypothesis of meaning that would secure them, he tells us, "is an idea worthy of faith" (53).

But for Tartaglia a transcendent hypothesis of meaning, such as the one Frankl claims to access, is not an idea worthy of *reason*, because when we follow our own rational lights beyond the everyday framework, we find nothing even closely resembling it. "Things make teleological sense only within life, and causal sense only within reality. Reality itself, however, makes neither teleological nor causal sense, for there is no purpose to it, and we cannot explain why it is here" (36). Tartaglia's deeper spiritual position here seems to be, however, that there is no purpose to reality, or life *itself*, because we cannot explain why it is here. We cannot locate a purpose for it in the same way we can for our daily framework activities. If we could explain it in this way, if we free makers could impose a point or purpose upon something we ourselves have not made, then and only then would life *itself* yield an affirmative answer to our question. But then we need to ask, would such an answer really be one that comes from life *itself*? If we decide that the only meaning available to us is of this self-imposed variety, then we have already chosen to relate to the universe that surrounds and transcends us in a way that by definition precludes it from having any kind of voice or summons that could speak into our question.

While Tartaglia marshals reasons to support an argument that would deny that

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<sup>12</sup> Here I have in mind something like Martin Buber's distinction between relating to a given entity in the world as either an 'it' or as a 'you'. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 58, 173.

the enveloping context possesses such a voice, his decision to do so also bears trademarks of its own leaps of faith. For there is something about the scientific *worldview* he trumpets (as opposed to everyday interdisciplinary, institutional, and communal scientific *practice*) that *requires* the enveloping physical world to be silent and purposeless. In its more ideological and strident forms, this worldview requires the enveloping cosmos to be infinitely pliant and manipulable. Reality must not talk back to us or otherwise resist our instrumental interventions. Because this is the world the scientific worldview needs, it is the world that it finds. It is the world discovered by a being who has already decided that it is the only maker of meaning, and so it is free to impose any purpose upon life it chooses (even if not upon life *itself*, which I will get to later). This cluster of anthropological and cosmological assumptions, while of course not completely lacking in rational support, are far from being rationally demonstrated either. As such, the worldview composed from them is just as much an article of faith as is the religious assumption that the context that transcends the framework is one that speaks to us as a partner in dialogue. Both positions are rooted in faith, finally, because no one, *per impossibile*, is in the epistemological position to describe how the world is *anyway*, and science, in its multiplicity of forms, just as much as religion, in its multiplicity of forms, is an answer to a question that we ourselves have asked. Try as we might, we cannot erase ourselves from the equation.<sup>13</sup>

Now, there can be no doubt that, to a great extent at least, we *become* who we say we are. But, should we decide to spiritually attune ourselves to the context that transcends our everyday framework, a possibility Tartaglia gestures toward at the end of the book, we may yet receive a message that might give moderns like us pause to consider if we should not in fact try to become something other than who we now find ourselves or think ourselves to be. Tartaglia's insistence that life *itself* is not of our making, and so finally resistant to human-imposed meaning, carves out its own kind of spiritual space, one that he says promises to transform our willful relationship to our surrounding context. The pursuit of philosophy itself brings him to this space:

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<sup>13</sup> Here I am in fundamental agreement with Hannah Arendt, who in the essay "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" offers the following interpretation: "[T]he answers of science will always remain replies to questions asked by men; the confusion in the issue of 'objectivity' was to assume that there could be answers without questions and results independent of the question-asking being" See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin, 2006), 49.

On occasion ... the ideas come alive, and I find myself realizing once more that my life belongs to a transcendent reality which serves no overall purpose, and which I cannot and should not hope to make any more than minimal sense of. Many kinds of philosophical reflection can get you to this place, and when you arrive everything takes on a new significance; this is the most sense I can make of the idea of spirituality. (184)

There is, indeed, something very spiritually edifying about Tartaglia's stated refusal to impose human-made meanings on life *itself*; for there is something deeply terrifying about those who presume to have secured the meaning of life *itself* in precisely these self-imposed terms—those who think the search is over and they have it all figured out. Tartaglia's position, that when we search for this kind of meaning to life *itself* we find none, has the spiritual benefit of encouraging us to cease imposing our finite human meanings on that which we have not made, on a world that transcends us. It encourages us to assume an attentive form of spiritual comportment that suspends this feverish activity, and instead puts us in a receptive posture.

Would it be too far of a stretch to say that this attentiveness or wakefulness journeys awhile alongside the form of spiritual comportment that Frankl urged his fellow prisoners to adopt? According to Frankl, the only hope for those “despairing men” whose inner lights were in danger of becoming extinguished under the pressure of a world that no longer recognized the value of human life was to somehow retain their sense of being an individual, “a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value.”<sup>14</sup> To prevent this slide into personal oblivion, which was always closely followed by physical oblivion, one had to *stop* asking about the meaning of life:

We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to

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<sup>14</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 49.

fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.<sup>15</sup>

While Tartaglia might agree with Frankl that we need to stop asking about the meaning of life, stop looking for a kind of self-imposed purpose or point to it, I still doubt, given everything he has said, whether he would embrace Frankl's further conviction that we must refrain from such hasty meaning imposition in order to put ourselves into the sort of receptive posture whereby we can once again become beings who are and can be questioned *by* life.

So, in spite of some common ground we seem to have arrived at an impasse. For Frankl, it is imperative that we are not the only meaning makers in the universe: "If the meaning which is waiting to be fulfilled by man were really nothing but a mere expression of self, or no more than a projection of his wishful thinking, it would immediately lose its demanding and challenging character; it could no longer call man forth or summon him" (100). Perhaps Frankl's spiritual posture in these and other passages ultimately amounts to just that, another form of wishful thinking, and life ultimately demands nothing from us. Perhaps we only want to think it does because such a summons would provide an underpinning for the kind of moral sense that Frankl suggests is so vital for us to maintain if we are to remain human. Perhaps that sense is finally only a sophisticated projection upon a physical universe that has no reason for existing and doesn't care that we are here. I have no philosophical arguments at my disposal that could disprove any of these conclusions (which is not to say that I am unable to marshal any reasons to doubt them). Tartaglia leaves his reader enough space to wonder, however, whether or not his practice of philosophy as a kind of spiritual exercise has brought him right up to the threshold of the very space in which a human being might once again become open to receiving a meaning that he did not simply construct or impose.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 77.

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## Reply to Ronald A. Kuipers

James Tartaglia\*

Just as Ronald A. Kuipers knew of me from my book on Rorty, I knew of him from his; the best general book on Rorty's philosophy there is, in my view (see Kuipers 2013). And just as he reports having felt some trepidation when first confronted by my title, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, I felt some trepidation when I first opened his commentary; knowing that he works at the *Institute for Christian Studies*. It turns out that neither of us had much to worry about. Well, he does report having 'let [my] version of nihilism trouble [his] sleep' (p. 52); for which I apologise! But nevertheless, I was delighted to discover that he sees a substantive common ground between our positions, which 'resides in the context of a difference that makes a difference,' but which still provides plenty of scope for us to 'continue a communal conversation' (p. 52). I agree. That is what I want to happen and I think this symposium marks the beginning of our contribution to it. It was particularly refreshing and gratifying, when reading Kuipers recount my position, to discover that he has seen exactly where I am coming from. Refreshing, because this will allow me to hit the ground running in our conversation; and gratifying, because he takes the position seriously.

Now maintaining both that we occupy a transcendent reality and that nihilism is true, places me in a tight critical spot within today's philosophical culture: because those sympathetic to the former are very unlikely to be sympathetic to the latter, and *vice versa*. But that strikes me as a major bonus, rather than any kind of disadvantage, because it allows me to talk to both sides. If I had wanted a glowing, uncritical reception, then I could have knocked out one of those 'Ditchkinian' books Kuipers mentions, using the very same title, and I reckon I might well have received it; along with a hostile and highly critical reception from the other side (if they could even be bothered). It is on the ground between these sides, however, that new thinking can occur, new alliances can be forged, and entrenched oppositions can start to degrade and transform; not good if you think one of the sides already has it all right, but I do not. I have not been so influenced

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by Rorty's pragmatism that such tactical considerations informed the development of my metaphysic, I hasten to add, for although it would make Rorty howl, the fact is that I was just trying to work out the right answers. But nevertheless, I am very pleased with where I have landed; for the aim is to develop philosophical thinking – and for helping out with that, it is a very useful place to be.

My aims and resources are quite different in relation to the two sides, by which I mean, very roughly, physicalists and believers in a meaningful reality. My resources for dialogue with physicalists are plentiful, because I used to be one and I retain their main instinct: that we must give full, undiluted credence to objective thought. But physicalism embodies a false metaphilosophy, since science cannot determine a credible metaphysic of reality. My aim, like others of my generation who have not focused on the meaning of life, is to bring about the extinction of physicalism. In my case this is not just because I think it is false, but also because I think the unchecked conviction that science *must* determine our metaphysic, coupled with indifference to what that metaphysic actually amounts to – as embodied in the physicalist doctrine that reality is 'whatever contemporary physics says it is' – threatens to downgrade and diminish philosophical discourse. And as I hint at the end of *Meaningless*, and will argue at length in its sequel, this is an outcome no sane person could wish for; not if they had really thought it through. But rejecting the half-baked and insidious metaphysic of physicalism is no obstacle to giving full, undiluted credence to science, in my view, since it was never *supposed* to determine a metaphysic. Philosophy and science are different. It was a bad, but entirely dispensable *philosophical* idea to try to merge them. Liberated from this idea, the philosophers it has seduced can reconnect with the heart of their tradition and put stultifying scepticism about their own discipline behind them.

It is exactly this aim with regards to physicalism which provides my main resource for dialogue with believers in a meaningful reality; even though 'transcendence' obviously provides the headline attraction. For my book is essentially an affirmation of philosophy: an affirmation of our ability to say things about the world which science cannot say, which are rational, and which answer to legitimate matters of human curiosity (cf. Kuipers 2002). Since physicalism closes down the space in which believers in a meaningful reality can talk about the things they want to talk about, and is the main intellectual force in our world which pushes such talk to the boundaries, my energies in this regard should surely



be very welcome to this side. It is just a shame, I imagine them thinking, that upon reaching transcendence, I ruin the plot with nihilism. Despite this sticking point, however, my opposition to physicalism and affirmation of philosophy still must at least earn me a hearing. So what do I want to say? What are my aims with regard to this side of the debate? I must admit that I had thought considerably more about my aims for the other side, but Kuipers has inspired me to now answer this question.

Do I want to persuade them of nihilism? Well, yes and no. The answer is ‘no’, to the extent that *Meaningless* does not set out to persuade people who think that God provides life with meaning that they are wrong. I am fully aware that there are many sophisticated arguments for the existence of God, and any reader of the book cannot fail to notice that I do not engage with any of them. There is an endnote in which I say that I think my transcendent hypothesis provides good reason to be suspicious of any kind of cosmological argument, and that I consider this the most promising line of argument in the area (PML, p. 191). I also say throughout the book that I think belief in a meaning of life is to be expected given natural human desires, the patterns of explanation within the framework, and the transcendence of reality. But nevertheless, if my aim had been to dissuade people of their belief in a transcendent context of meaning, then I clearly wrote the wrong book.

Primarily, I was trying to increase metaphilosophical self-consciousness, vindicate the question of the meaning of life, undermine physicalism, solve problems which physicalists cannot solve, and thereby provide an affirmation of philosophy. One of my many subsidiary aims was to persuade people that the meaning of life is not provided by social meaning; but this critique was directed to the *other* side, since substituting social meaning for the relevant kind is just the kind of thing physicalism primes you for. Believers in a meaningful reality should welcome this critique, especially since advocates of the ‘meaning *in* life’ agenda typically contend that even if God did exist, it would be *irrelevant* to their issue; which strikes me as one of the more conspicuous absurdities within the debate – and a very telling one, as regards the real motivational drivers of physicalism. My concern with nihilism was predominantly expounding, rather than establishing it; within an intellectual culture where it has been marginalised as an ominous threat which nobody would or should pay much attention to, unless of course they were confused, depressed, destructive, or had a remedy to offer. And in the course of expounding it, I tried to show that it is legitimate, plausible and very

philosophically interesting.

On the other hand, however, the answer must in a sense be ‘yes’, since I think nihilism is true. I think that once we get clear about nihilism, we see there is nothing wrong with it, and that a lack of clarity on this matter understandably skews people’s judgements. I think that metaphysically, at least, transcendence is all that the meaningful reality side was ever driving at – and that they were right. And I think that my metaphysic, taken as a whole, gives good reason to think that we cannot escape the rootedness of our cognition in objective thought, and hence that there can be no good reasons to make the kind of positive assertions about transcendent reality which this side does sometimes make. In philosophy, if you think your view is right, then you obviously want to persuade anyone who will listen. But aims come in different shapes and sizes.

To see what I mean, consider the following example; selected in order to be so obviously far removed from the topic at hand that unintended connotations will not be invoked by the specific content. Suppose you think that your friend’s attachment to a certain brand of car is unjustified; you do not think they are particularly good. You are both car-enthusiasts, so you like to talk cars together; he knows what you think and *vice versa*. Given this point of contention between you, the topic of ‘that brand’ is bound to keep coming up; but there are many other, related things for you to talk about. You would like him to come around to your point of view, of course, even if you do not remotely expect this; but you certainly would not try to force the matter. For you only want him to come around if *he* wants to; rather as you would not want to be forced to grudgingly concede to him. This is because you are both convinced. This does not mean that you have closed your mind on the matter. For you are open to a revelation that takes you by surprise and makes you see the brand in a whole new light; just not tiresome, vaguely familiar considerations, which you might not know how to overcome at present, but which nevertheless leave you convinced that you doubtless *could* answer them, given the time and inclination. Only something genuinely new would change your mind about that brand. But there are many other things to talk about, in a world where people hold views on cars which you both find outrageous. So do you aim to persuade your friend that his brand is no good? Only half-heartedly and in good humour.

That is pretty much how I feel in relation to the meaningful reality camp. I have no revelation to offer them, and I doubt they are going to find one for me. When I lay out my position, it is only in a half-hearted attempt to persuade them

on *this* matter; in stark contrast to my aims with regard to physicalists. Now this conciliatory, rather apathetic stance, might seem disingenuous on the grounds that the meaning of life is such an important topic; as my own book argues at length. But actually, what is primarily important to my aims in the book is the *question*, about which I see eye-to-eye with this camp. I think my answer to this question provides considerable philosophical insight, but I am not looking for converts from this side. I can see that I would care more if I thought reality *was* meaningful, but that is good, since if what I said inspires others to try to persuade me, we may both learn in the process. Moreover, if you think reality is meaningful in a good way, then you presumably think that this is the most important thing in the world; the meaning is where all the importance of the world resides. Even if I am right that nihilism is evaluatively neutral, then, from their starting point, the transition to nihilism is bound to be a serious downer in the short term. So why would I want to go out of my way to bring about such a transition? Who wants to be Richard Dawkins (*qua* philosopher)?

It is the other side that I am really concerned to bring around to nihilism; to open them up to the question to which it provides an answer – an answer which, if they took the problem seriously, they would already be conducive to. The meaningful reality side is already open to the question, which has come to seem like their sole preserve. But I want to make it available to both sides, thereby widening the space for philosophical debate and speculation which physicalism is trying to close down. This would benefit everyone. Within this space, there is room for all kinds of positions on all kinds of topics; including positive views about the meaning of life. So on reflection, I think, my main aim with regards to the meaningful reality side is to bring them into dialogue with the mainstream of philosophy which physicalism has unfortunately seized; so that we can all talk about questions of natural philosophical interest from our differing perspectives. Were this to transpire, then I would be on the other side with regards to nihilism, and whenever the idea of a meaningful reality was brought to bear on other topics. But now the lines of opposition would have changed; they would have come together within a more unified discipline.

With these aims in mind, I shall turn to the comment on spirituality I make on the last page of *Meaningless*, since it provides the focus of Kuiper's paper (PML, p. 184). I suggested that there is something spiritual about reflecting philosophically upon our meaningless, transcendent reality. I was deliberately cautious in saying that this is the 'most sense' I can make of spirituality, because

the flat-footed will remind me that you can hardly be spiritual if you do not believe in spirit; at which I would immediately concede their flat-footed point. And yet the meanings of words move on, and I readily know what is meant when it is said of certain musicians that their music passed through a more 'soulful' period, or that they tapped into the 'spirit of Africa'. Thoughts about immaterial substances and communal souls do not cross my mind; I think of a sound and where it came from, and if more than this is sometimes meant, that is tangential as far as I am concerned. Now when, in philosophy, we try to rationally think about reality beyond the objective thinking and social framework that dominant our lives, this does indeed strike me as the kind of thinking which might aptly be called 'spiritual' these days. It is the kind of thought which tries to get some kind of rational grip on the 'something else' which all kinds of people who think of themselves as spiritual are reaching for. That is why I said it; it is an underutilized and extremely attractive selling-point for a discipline with a very bad image-problem. When I said that 'everything takes on a new significance', I meant a *philosophical* significance; that is the kind of spirituality I favour, and the only one I really understand.

I am very glad to see that Kuipers thinks I used the right word, for he says that,

There is, indeed, something very spiritually edifying about Tartaglia's stated refusal to impose human-made meanings on life itself [...] Tartaglia's position, that when we search for this kind of meaning to life itself we find none, has the spiritual benefit of encouraging us to cease imposing our finite human meanings on that which we have not made, on a world that transcends us. It encourages us to assume an attentive form of spiritual comportment that suspends this feverish activity, and instead puts us in a receptive posture. (p. 67)

The last sentence gives me pause, but up until that point, he captures my intentions almost exactly; I would qualify 'cease imposing our finite meanings' with 'except when they are philosophical, and thus suitably sparse.' The last sentence would be okay too, if the 'attentive form of spiritual comportment' and 'receptive posture' just meant openness to philosophical understanding. But Kuipers means more, as is made clear here:

If we decide that the only meaning available to us is of [the] self-imposed variety, then we have already chosen to relate to the universe that surrounds and transcends us in a way that by definition precludes it from having any kind of voice or summons that could speak into our question. (p. 65)

And here we see the basis of Kuiper's critique. He thinks I have made a similar mistake to the one which my qualified endorsement of spirituality offers a remedy to. For the reason I endorse nihilism, in Kuiper's view, is that on achieving the important insight that we must stop looking for a self-imposed meaning to life, I subsequently draw on human-made meaning to steer me to nihilism. Instead, I should have stopped short at the point where I reached his 'receptive posture', on the grounds that, 'even if it is true that the transcending universe or cosmos responds only silently to our question, no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer "no"' (p. 62).

Kuipers thinks my commitment to nihilism is a step too far, then. He thinks I should have rested with an openness to other kinds of meaning, and wonders if I would consider retracing my steps in order to return to a point at which we 'put ourselves into the sort of receptive posture whereby we can once again become beings who are and can be questioned *by* life' (p. 68). Thus he closes his paper by saying,

Tartaglia leaves his reader enough space to wonder, however, whether or not his practice of philosophy as a kind of spiritual exercise has brought him right up to the threshold of the very space in which a human being might once again become open to receiving a meaning that he did not simply construct or impose. (p. 68)

Now Kuipers and I are both actively thinking into the same space; that much is clear. The question is whether I am still open to hearing something within that space; to passively receiving it. To this, my answer is 'yes'; and yet I am not actively *listening out* for anything. I am not listening out for the doorbell at the moment, but if it rings, I will hear it. If reality is transcendent, I could in principle hear intimations of its meaning; this is possible on my metaphysic, unlike that of the physicalists. For reality might be meaningful, and it might be able to convey its meaning to us in a manner which the framework and objective thought makes it hard for us to hear. But I am not hearing anything. And if I did seem to, I would

endeavour to rationalise it away. Only if I failed in this, but found that I could rationalise what I heard in a new way, would I take it seriously.

I do not hear anything in Frankl's report of his 'spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom' and transcending the 'hopeless, meaningless world' within which he found himself imprisoned (p. 64), not because I am insensitive to the feeling expressed in this passage, but rather because I find these kinds of claim easy to rationalise away in terms of the framework and objective thought. To even begin to spell out this kind of rationalisation *would* be insensitive in this case; but Kuipers and I both know the kind of things that could be said – clearly the phenomenology of Frankl's experience, and the sense that he gave to it, *could* have happened just the same way if nihilism were true. We were not always able to rationalize such voices away, however. It is perfectly understandable that people have thought, and still do think, that the meanings within our lives are the central focus of a reality in which something watches over us; or that they are part of a nature that has its own contiguous meanings which we should listen out for. It was natural, before Copernicus, to think that we were at the physical centre of reality; and it was natural, before Darwin, to think that we were at the centre of the phenomenon of life on earth. But it turned out, as a matter of fact, that we were wrong on both counts. These facts were exactly *not* things we primed ourselves for and hence made ourselves hear. They took us by surprise.

Now I could hardly be more enthusiastically in agreement with Kuipers than when he says, as I would put it, that our desire for power led to us finding ways of manipulating reality, and hence that we came to conceive of it in accordance with how we could best manipulate it (pp. 66-7). That is a central topic in the sequel I am writing. But recognising this motivation does not devalue what we learnt in the process. It is not that the human desire for power deafened us to voices that are really there, but rather that as an offshoot of developing objective thought in this manner, we learnt that the voices are not there. Kuipers says that my trust in the deliverances of objective thought is just as much an 'article of faith' as the religious believer's assumption that transcendent reality speaks to us (p. 66). But there is no faith involved in believing what you have firm inductive evidence for; as P.F. Strawson said, in effect, this is a major and inviolable component of what being 'rational' means (Strawson 1952). The voices are simply not there in the objective world. And we cannot discover anything new in this regard from the metaphysical insight that the objective world is transcended. Yet I grant Kuiper's point that 'no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer "no".'

Consequently, I take my definitive ‘no’ from a combination of objective thought and metaphysical reflection. I find that we have no reason to think our notion of meaningfulness has application to transcendent reality; and that incomplete as it is, objective thought provides our best guide to the nature of that reality. That is definitive enough for me; idle possibilities do not need to be ruled out.

This is the kind of reasoning I am relying upon, then, but perhaps it is deafening me to another ‘take’ on reality which is superior. To assert this, however, is to provide a reason to give up on the reason I am relying on; and I cannot see it as a good one. For if there is another kind of reasoning which would side-line both objective thought and the kind of bare metaphysical reflection on transcendence which I engaged in, thereby allowing me to hear what reality is saying, then the superiority of this new reasoning would have to explain and usurp the old; otherwise I could never rationally accept it as superior. Listening out might provide me with this new way of reasoning, thereby allowing me to hear what reality is saying. But my old reasoning provides me with no reason to actively listen out, because I am not expecting to hear anything. I could do it anyway, in the hope of receiving some kind of revelation. However, if there is something to be understood of the prerequisite enormity, which would explain the meaning of transcendent reality in such a way as to encapsulate and usurp both objective thought and metaphysical reflection of the kind which reveals to me only the bare fact of transcendent existence, then I would have thought the only place I am likely to hear it is in a philosophy book. And quite frankly, I would be amazed if there really were something of this magnitude in extant philosophy which has entirely evaded my notice.

So I have no reason to give up on the reasoning I am relying on in order to make myself more receptive to something else. The reasoning I am relying on gives me no reason, and the new reasoning cannot provide that reason unless either somebody tells me what it is, or it somehow occurs to me. Actively listening out is not going to make the latter happen, however, because I have absolutely no idea what to listen for; without the new reasoning at my disposal, I am simply not going to hear anything. So I should do nothing more than remain open to a new discovery; which I always try to do anyway. Perhaps the injunction to actively listen out is rooted in emotion rather than reason. But I cannot help it if I do not feel it, and without the new reasoning at my disposal, I have no reason to think that it makes any difference to my job as a philosopher.

Kuipers asks whether I would bracket ‘joy, wonder, or gratitude’ (p. 58) as

attunements akin to boredom and anxiety? I see what he is driving at – perhaps I have been taken in by existentialist gloom in privileging these two. But nevertheless, I do think they are special. Joy shows a natural propensity to engage with the framework. But does it creep over us when the framework recedes, thereby revealing something about our basic situation? Is there a joy in simply existing? I do not think so; it depends on the context in which you are existing. If you are frustratingly isolated from your framework goals while locked in a prison cell, boredom is inevitable, but not joy; a rush of joy when you realise your inner resolve not to let your present circumstances beat you, sounds like the call of the framework to me. Wonder also seems dependent on circumstances; you need something to inspire wonder. Simply existing may be enough in our more philosophical moments, but even then, this seems to be a product of the framework goal to understand. And gratitude, of the kind Kuipers has in mind, just strikes me as an imposition from the natural patterns of explanation we employ in the framework; something is good, so gratitude has to be expressed to somebody. Boredom and anxiety, on the other hand, however unpleasant they may often be, do strike me as philosophically illuminating responses to our basic situation; for the reason that they are a product of our projection into the framework losing its hold, and can thus reveal that projection to us.

To return to the main thrust of Kuiper's paper, then, I do not think I am going to hear anything. I am pretty sure that I do not think this because I have bought into unjustified assumptions that block my ears; I can hear just fine, but since I am not expecting to hear anything, I am not actively listening out. I would only have my ears to the ground, and recommend this attitude in my philosophy, if I thought there was good reason to expect to hear something; when in actual fact, I think there is very good reason *not* to expect to hear anything. Nevertheless, if I did hear something which I could not rationalise away, such that I was instead inspired to rationalise what I heard, then I fully grant that this could be amazing; I would love to read the book I would then write – so long as it was not the product of me losing my marbles. I am convinced this will never happen, but I am certainly open to a big surprise, especially if it is a good one. So I have an open attitude, just not the active one Kuipers recommends. This is a point of contention between us that we can continue to debate; and hopefully find things to say that others will find interesting. But to my mind, at least, this pales into insignificance against the fact that we are both thinking into a space which many other philosophers are missing out on – and because they are missing out, they are being inspired to say



things which are not only false, but detrimental to philosophy. Judging from his paper, I think Kuipers might just agree; if so, I put it down to our shared background in Rorty.

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## The Deep Personal Resonance of Nihilism

Tracy Llanera\*

### Abstract

This article examines two concerns that accompany James Tartaglia's claims about nihilism in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. The first concern involves Tartaglia's narrow conception of nihilism. His view is that nihilism is practically neutral. In response, I explore how practical consequences are integral to both the general understanding of the problem of nihilism and his own interpretation of the concept. The second concern involves a tension in Tartaglia's distinction between practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. As a reply, I explain how the notion of deep personal resonance could be interpreted as a practical consequence. The article concludes by questioning the motivation to justify the neutrality of nihilism.

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, James Tartaglia claims that nihilism, or the idea that reality is meaningless, is a philosophical fact. To exist means nothing: for any living species, existence carries no fundamental or teleological value apart from the biological; for human beings in particular, existence holds no epistemological burden, moral weight or spiritual agenda. The questions 'what is the meaning of life?', 'what am I here for?' or 'why do human beings exist?' bear no fruit if we are looking for some sort of universally-binding, context-transcending significance. The book suggests that our countless tries in religion and philosophy to respond positively, notably in terms of proposing a transcendent framework to accommodate the possibility of an overall meaning to life, have led to tricky and often unreliable paths. The simple fact that Tartaglia tries to convince his readers of is this: that we exist, just as easily as we could not exist.

But denying a transcendent context of meaning does not mean forsaking the idea of transcendence itself. Tartaglia thinks that the importance of philosophy lies in being able to engage the concept of transcendence fruitfully in the face of nihilism. In his view, transcendence should be reconsidered as a conceptual tool that rightly belongs to the metaphysical concerns of philosophy, and herein lies the novelty of his work. The version of transcendence that Tartaglia offers is one

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that operates *without* the pretension or hope of meaningfulness (unlike in the case of religion, and at times, science). This bold hypothesis has ramifications on both a philosophical dimension and a practical dimension. In terms of philosophy, Tartaglia impressively outlines how the transcendent hypothesis changes the terms of contemporary philosophical debates. A substantial part of his book aims at redefining our understanding of consciousness, time, and universals in view of the reality of nihilism. His redescription of these particular metaphysical concepts responds to the intellectual burden Tartaglia has set for himself in the introduction: to prove that ‘the question of the meaning of life, to which nihilism provides the answer, is the keystone of philosophy; it locks the rest of its traditional conceptions in place, and allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science’ (Tartaglia 2015: 7). Tartaglia’s notable conversation partners in recent review essays (see Bennett-Hunter 2016, Leach 2016) and in the special issue on ‘Nihilism and the Meaning of Life’ of *The Journal of Philosophy of Life* engage these implications in greater detail.

His work also offers a reconsideration of our understanding of nihilism from a practical dimension. Tartaglia proposes that we ought to take nihilism as a neutral philosophical fact. He thinks that it has no moral quality and its truth makes no difference in the exercise of daily life and the availability of sources of meaning within our social context. It is this aspect of Tartaglia’s argument that I want to take issue with in this article. I claim that there are two concerns that accompany the understanding of the practical dimension of nihilism in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. The first concern involves Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism. His view is that nihilism is practically neutral. In response, I explore how practical consequences are integral to both the general understanding of the problem of nihilism and his own interpretation of the concept. The second concern involves a tension in Tartaglia’s distinction between practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. As a reply, I explain how the notion of deep personal resonance could be interpreted as a practical consequence. The article concludes by questioning the motivation to justify the neutrality of nihilism on Tartaglia’s part.

## **1. Nihilism: narrow and neutral**

In this section, I problematize Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism – a nihilism that is devoid of or disconnected from practical consequences. The

common view in the Western tradition is that the significance of nihilism is directly related to the nature of its effects. Nihilism is usually understood to have practical consequences for human beings that are bad, though in some cases they are taken to be good (or a mixture of both). The idea that nihilism is bad can be found in the writings of Heidegger, and in the writings of contemporary figures such as Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly. These thinkers all propose ways of ‘overcoming’ nihilism and thus of avoiding those bad consequences that come with the realization that life has no meaning. To achieve redemption from meaninglessness – one indicated by our attunement to the moods of anxiety and boredom – Heidegger argues that we should embark on the quest of revealing life’s authentic meaning (see 1927, 1936-37, 1939-46, 1954). In the face of nihilism, Taylor thinks that there are many rich and powerful sources of moral and spiritual significance in modernity. He also suggests that our culture should cultivate the possibility of a renewed theism in a secular age (see 1991, 1992, 2007, 2011). Dreyfus and Kelly propose that a modern Homeric polytheism can ward off the threat of meaninglessness. This polytheism involves becoming attuned to the plural manifestations of the sacred in modernity (2011a, 2011b). In contrast, the likes of Nietzsche and Camus recognize the good behind the phenomenon of nihilism apart from the bad. The realization of life’s essential meaninglessness can liberate human beings from the debilitating framework of Western religion. It can also lead to their acceptance of life’s natural constraints and finitude. In place of the misguided values of the Christian tradition, Nietzsche thinks that the truth of nihilism encourages the creation of new and more worthwhile goals for human beings (see 1882, 1883, 1888a, 1888b). Meanwhile, Camus argues that meaninglessness paves the way for the heroic, Sisyphean acceptance of life’s absurdity (see 1942). For Nietzsche and Camus, the ability to transcend the life-negating horrors of nihilism serves as a testament to human potential and resilience.

In comparison to these familiar evaluations, Tartaglia’s thinner conception and his morally neutral assessment of nihilism take on a wholly different tone. For him, the total answer to the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is that reality exists for no reason and that there is no compelling basis to make a moral assessment of this fact. Hence, to claim that nihilism is good or bad, whether in terms of its inherent nature or its practical consequences, are mistaken strategies:

For nihilism does not and could not hurt anybody. The realization of

nihilism might cause pain, but then, any fact about the world might be counted as bad on that criterion; a man might react to the realization that he is short by becoming a military despot, for instance. Nihilism is quite unlike a fact such as that nuclear weapons have been invented, where it is the possible consequences of this fact, rather than the mere grasping of it, that are bad. So I do not think the possible bad consequences of realizing a fact provides a good criterion for capturing what we mean in saying that the fact itself could be bad; for on that criterion, all facts could be good or bad, even those of mathematics. So given that I can also see no potential in moral accounts other than consequentialism for classifying nihilism as a fact that could be bad, I think we should conclude that although the existence of life might be, its existence for no reason could not (Tartaglia 2015: 7).

For Tartaglia, life having no meaning is a fact that one ‘grasps’ in the process of self-realization. It is not a kind of knowledge that is inherently bad and neither is it one that inevitably leads to consequences that could be judged as objectively bad (or good). Tartaglia is only interested in nihilism defined as a fact that has no bearing on a moral or existential plane. In short, he offers us a narrow conception of nihilism. But is nihilism recognizable if the criterion of practical consequences is taken out of the picture? In my view, Tartaglia’s restricted version of nihilism requires further questioning.

The inherently practical significance that nihilism has in the Western Tradition can be seen from Karen Carr’s account of nihilism in *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (1992), which provides a nice contrast with Tartaglia’s. According to Carr, there are many possible definitions of nihilism and these definitions heavily overlap. In particular, she suggests five elements that inform the historical concept of nihilism: (1) *epistemological*, or the denial of the possibility of knowledge; (2) *alethiological*, or the denial of the reality of truth; (3) *metaphysical* or *ontological*, or the denial of an (independently existing) world; *ethical* or *moral*, or the denial of moral values; and (5) *existential*, or the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness of life, due to existence having no meaning. While it is wise to make these distinctions for the purposes of argument, she also contends that they are fundamentally interrelated. The positions of Heidegger, Taylor, Dreyfus, Kelly, Nietzsche and Camus given briefly in the beginning of this section heed this sense of interrelation between the different elements of nihilism. In their writings, realizing

the truth of nihilism (of the epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical, or moral kind) can be disorienting and its practical consequences (of the existential kind) are explosive by nature. If we follow Carr's reading, consequentialism then matters in nihilism since its existential element is fundamentally energized by the other components of nihilism. As Carr remarks: 'It is because we believe there is no truth that we conclude the world is pointless; it is because we think that knowledge is mere illusion that we describe life as meaningless; it is because we see no moral fabric in the universe that we see our existence as without value. The despair of existential nihilism is parasitic on one of the other logically prior forms' (1992: 20). In this interpretation, nihilism's possible ontological impact participates in propelling urgent reflection on the part of philosophers. Its practical repercussions are responsible for making the fact of meaninglessness worth talking about.

In response, Tartaglia may raise the distinction between the meaning *of* life and the meaning *in* life as he does in the book, a distinction that has been reviewed as amounting to 'a very persuasive case that recent discussions have equivocated between these two different concepts' (Leach 2016: 283). He may argue that these thinkers have been construed by their readers as speaking about the former, when they are really speaking about the latter. He may even suggest that these philosophers have irresponsibly conflated this distinction in their own writings. For Tartaglia, the meaning *of* life is a primordial issue that raises the question of what universally constitutes and justifies human life's worth and purpose. Since it intends to make an appraisal of reality and the fundamental human condition, it should be treated as a properly philosophical question. Meanwhile, the issue about the meaning *in* life is about social meaning. It is essentially concerned about how lives can be made meaningful in their own particular, finite, and culture-bound way. In convenient terms, the meaning of life question is apt if we are interested in the *truth* of nihilism, and the meaning in life issue is important if we are interested in the *experience* of the phenomenon of meaninglessness. While they concern related issues, they are also separable. Tartaglia makes it clear that he is not interested in social meaning; furthermore, he thinks that the practical concern to 'maximise social meaningfulness' is an agenda that does not strike him as 'terribly philosophical' (Tartaglia 2015: 4). He notes that the intellectual legacy of Nietzsche and Marx is to blame for sedimenting the question of social meaning as a legitimate concern for theorists. Their legacy is responsible for obfuscating the distinction between the original philosophical question about the meaning of

life and the more ‘recent cultural product’ of maximizing the experience of human meaning (Tartaglia 2015: 192, 4). For example, he characterizes *All Things Shining*, a book by Dreyfus and Kelly that is largely beholden to the concept of Nietzschean nihilism and Heideggerian phenomenology, as having moralistic intent (Tartaglia 2015: 192). Since *All Things Shining* suggests how one can live a spiritually flourishing life in the modern world, it thereby belongs to the quest for finding meaning *in* life.

Yet interestingly, Tartaglia uses some of these thinkers as resources for speaking about the meaning *of* life. He employs their writings to develop and confirm his suspicion that life is fundamentally meaningless. Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus and Schopenhauer are engaged in the first two chapters of his book in a manner that helps ground and legitimize his position about philosophy and nihilism. When Tartaglia talks about Heidegger’s fundamental moods of boredom and anxiety or about Camus’s notion of the absurd, their work is construed as having something integral to say about the human condition. When he discusses Nietzsche’s critique of authoritarianism and the crucial role of nihilistic despair in cultural progress and Schopenhauer’s asceticism as responses to striving and boredom, their claims are assessed not in terms of enhancing or adding to the experience of human meaning, but in terms of their relationship with the ‘deep, natural and ancient’ question of the meaning of life. These discussions reveal that Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism is indebted to its broader notion – a notion that may not have been formulated by these philosophers without their attunement to the ‘universal’ practical consequences of nihilism for human beings. If this is indeed the case, then it would be inaccurate to treat the work of these theorists as pertinent only to the ‘less philosophical’ aim of maximizing meaning, which the dichotomy between the meaning *in* and *of* life invites readers to do. It is reasonable to posit that their concerns loom larger and deeper than the modern and pluralistic goal of ‘determining the best ways for people to make their own meaning’ (Tartaglia 2015: 4). It is also sensible to suppose that the conflation of the meaning of life question and the goal of social meaning cannot be cleanly separated when it comes to the writings of these modern philosophers. In short, while the distinction could be useful in assessing contemporary discourses, it would be inappropriate to apply it on Tartaglia’s own analysis (Tartaglia 2015: appendix).

## **2. The tension between the practical and the personal**

In this section, I explore how the response of deep personal resonance to nihilism could be construed as a practical consequence. To reiterate, Tartaglia's position is that nihilism should not be assessed in terms of its practical repercussions. He analogizes human life and the recognition of its fundamental nihilism to playing a game of chess: 'But although reflection on nihilism may provide the spur to practical reflection, nihilism itself is lacking in practical consequences. After all, even if realizing that chess is just an activity of moving pieces around a board may have a bearing on life outside of chess, it is of no relevance within chess; and so it seems that realizing the truth of nihilism should likewise be of no relevance within life' (Tartaglia 2015: 42). For Tartaglia, while the activity may cause a player to philosophize about chess, how the game itself is played will remain unaffected by this reflective act. Applied to human existence, grasping that life has no fundamental meaning will not modify or shape our access and relationship to the many sources of social meaning for human flourishing. However, Tartaglia also says something in his reflection that is particularly puzzling:

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that your life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.' (Tartaglia 2015: 7).

He also says something similar in Chapter 4, which I now quote at length:

As regards lack of progress, once it is recognized that questions of enframement are integral to the subject-matter of philosophy – which along with religion is one of only two areas of culture which asks such questions – then philosophy-scepticism is immediately answered by the fact that the discipline of philosophy discovered the truth of nihilism. Thus philosophy answered the most important enframement question of all, the question



which provided its *raison d'être*. This discovery has produced – or at least has the potential to produce – a significant change in our self-understanding, since it overthrows the presumption of a meaning of life that has dominated most of human history, a presumption continually reinforced by both our way of life within the framework, and our usual patterns of explanation. With the discovery of nihilism, then, human beings – who have always been in the unique position of knowing they will die – have learnt in addition that their existence serves no overall purpose. Knowledge of this kind lacks any particular practical consequences, but it does have the potential to achieve a deep personal resonance with every individual who reflects on it, thereby making other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities in comparison (Tartaglia 2016: 74-75).

In these two quotations, Tartaglia denies the practical ramifications of nihilism but also asserts that the grasping of this truth can achieve an intimate, powerful, and transformative effect. This paradoxical hypothesis is worth problematizing since Tartaglia's characterization of deep personal resonance communicates the possibility of a dramatic transfiguration of an individual's life-orientation, which in my mind includes both thought and action. Will nihilism's reflective potential in making 'other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities' spur the re-framing of human life? Will contemplation on the conclusion that 'everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that your life is too' cause a different way of thinking and behaving? In short, does the idea of a deep personal resonance indicate a connection to what might be understood as a practical consequence? We thus find a tension in Tartaglia's text when we inquire about the link between these two reactions.

The motivation for reasoning in this manner is related to the earlier discussion of how practical consequences are integral in conceptualizing nihilism. Nietzsche, Camus, Heidegger and Schopenhauer are philosophers who were attuned to nihilism in the way Tartaglia characterizes its impact in reflective thought. They were aware of its various and transformational practical consequences both to individuals suffering from nihilism and to the nature of modern culture at large. If we take nihilism as something that propels the direction and development of their philosophy, then their reaction to nihilism would be exemplary candidates for what deep personal resonance as a response might be like. Furthermore, the claim that the realization of meaninglessness can be held as relevant only for

reflection – that it can be responsible for ‘transfiguring everything while changing nothing’ – is not convincing when we consult its impact on the cultural history of the West. After all, the phenomenon of nihilism has arguably inspired a paradigm shift toward existentialism, religious critique, and anti-authoritarianism in philosophy, politics and the arts in the twentieth century, with the publication of works ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1866, 1880) and to the political mobilization of the Russian nihilists. These writings and movements are ready examples of reactions to the meaninglessness of life that are socially metamorphic in real life.

### 3. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I now question why the urge to reflect about the effect of nihilism as deep personal resonance even exists in Tartaglia’s text. Recall the classic formula for existential nihilism: when we give up on religion and Plato as paths for legitimating our metaphysical and moral hopes, then nihilism, or some sort of epistemological or emotional or spiritual crisis, is expected as the result. The loss of authority can lead to an atmosphere of uncertainty and even melancholy, as existentialist thinkers like Dostoyevsky, Camus, and Kierkegaard have imagined, or thinkers like Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have hypothesized. However, Rorty thinks that the grand anxiety about nihilism is not an automated response. He suggests that ‘we can, for example, tell Zarathustra that the news that God is dead is not all that big a deal. We can tell Heidegger that one can be a perfectly good example of Dasein without even having been what he calls “authentic”’ (Rorty 2010: 507). Concerns about the practical consequences of nihilism, in short, can disappear in a world that does not care about the threat of meaninglessness. In this context, there would be no reason to contemplate or placate any metaphysical worry or anxiety. The urge to appease meaninglessness would simply not exist. Nihilism, in a truly secular age, would be taken for granted; only social meaning becomes worth talking about in an age liberated from these contemplative urges. Tartaglia seems to expect this level of practical neutrality from those who have become aware of life’s essential nihilism. However, Tartaglia’s approach – his lengthy and intense discussion of nihilism and his suggestion of deep personal resonance as a response toward meaninglessness – seems to contradict the position of practical neutrality that he endorses.

Tartaglia could avoid these criticisms if he did not go as far as raising claims about the neutrality of nihilism. Doing so would avoid the problems regarding his narrow and neutral conception of nihilism as well as the tension between the practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. The threat of nihilism would be a non-issue if the metaphysical urge to explore the question of the meaning of life did not exist. This is as far as I wish to go by way of conclusion, unlike others who have suggested that his account of transcendence, universals, and time could stand without positing nihilism at all (See Bennett-Hunter 2016). After all, there is still much more to talk about nothing.

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## Reply to Tracy Llanera

James Tartaglia\*

In her superb paper, Tracy Llanera highlights the apparent tension between two claims about nihilism that I make in my book: that it has the potential to achieve deep personal resonance, and that it is a neutral, non-evaluative fact which lacks practical consequences. This leads her to ‘question why the urge to reflect about the effect of nihilism as deep personal resonance even exists in Tartaglia’s text’ (p. 89). It is an excellent question.

It certainly does seem puzzling. On the one hand, this is *the meaning of life* we are talking about – yours and mine – so of course there is potential for deep personal resonance. Nihilism tells us that all the projects we put our hearts and souls into, despairing when things go wrong and rejoicing when things go right ... all of that is not really going anywhere. There is no reason for humans to exist, so there is no reason for us to do that stuff; except that we want to. Meaning is not a pre-existing backdrop to our lives, but a web we spin. If things go well as we move around within in, then we can make a great life for ourselves and others. But still, there is nothing to be achieved except what we want to achieve. The hermit who never tries to do anything much is not making the metaphysical mistake of failing to grasp what life actually amounts; only, perhaps, a practical mistake. John Gray tells us that, ‘The pygmies of the African rainforests – now nearly extinct – work only to meet the needs of the day, and spend most of their lives idling’ (Gray 2002: 195). They are not making a mistake either. And neither is the high-flying businessman who works a 16-hour day. Not *that* kind of mistake, in any case.

I cannot see how recognising this – or at least considering it as a serious candidate for truth – could fail to achieve deep personal resonance; hence my comment about solipsism, which Llanera quotes (p. 87). I fully recognise that interest in philosophy varies between people, so I am not expecting everyone to be immediately dumbstruck and thereafter obsessed. But nevertheless, so long as you have not so thoroughly closed your mind to philosophy that you refuse to

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reflect on it – and to do so is to take an active stance, for which the typical scientific motivations are highly dubious – then it seems to me that *while* you are reflecting on it, if only in passing, then the resonance will be there. Even if you have never believed that there is a meaning of life, you have still lived, so it will be there.

So I seem to be saying that nihilism is a big deal. And yet, on the other hand, I seem to be saying that it is not: hence Llanera's puzzle. For my central claim about nihilism is that it is a non-evaluative, neutral fact. When you grasp and embrace it, the sky will not fall down, and neither will you be elevated to a blissful state above the 'tyranny' of the framework. I am amused by the thought of an overly busy, stressed office worker using my book as a self-help guide: 'At last, I've shed the burden of all that troublesome meaning!' However, the joke trades on both the traditional presupposition that nihilism is a negative evaluation, and the meaning of / in life conflation. Leave those behind you and it is hard to see what practical consequences nihilism *could* have. Suppose it is a metaphysical fact about reality. Evidently, it will have no effect on the people who do not accept it. And as for those who do, what exactly are they supposed to do? Imagine you thought nihilism was true; would you not continue going about your business exactly as before? Since your life has not been evaluated in any way through your acceptance of this fact, and it changes nothing of your empirical assessment of your situation (there are no new objects or events for you to contend with), I fail to see what practical bearing this could have. Of course, accepting nihilism might mean losing your belief in a meaning of life, if you have one, and *that* would have practical consequences. But this is because belief in a meaning of life is evaluative, and hence has practical consequences: both when you have it and when you lose it.

So why do I apparently say that nihilism both is and is not a big deal? Being the incredibly astute critic that she clearly is, Llanera instinctively hones in on a passage which comes close to unlocking the answer (pp. 87-8). In it, I am discussing philosophy-scepticism, of the kind which is rampant in our scientific culture. If we had been playing the 'warmer – cooler' game, then at this point I would have said 'scorching hot'. Another clue is provided by my discussion, in Chapter 8, of the different roles of philosophy and science, the current divergence in the cultural status they enjoy, and the most philosophically significant difference between them, namely that science produces technology. Put all this together, and with the help of Sherlock Holmes, she might perhaps have been able

to ‘deduce’ the answer; on the other hand, she might have needed to enlist the aid of a psychic, rather than Holmes.

*Meaningless* covers a lot of ground; within today’s philosophical climate, a very unusually large amount for a non-introductory monograph. I used the word ‘system’ in the subtitle. I did not plan on having a subtitle, but Bloomsbury understandably wanted something on the cover to provide more information about the topics being addressed, and I warmed to the idea primarily because it allowed me to use this word. It was meant as a statement, harking back to an earlier time when philosophy was more respected and philosophers did not pretend to be scientists. The book is not really a system on its own, but at best the beginning of one; for I do intend to continue addressing the traditional problems of philosophy in a systematically related fashion. The sequel to *Meaningless*, which I am working on at the moment, is called *Gods and Titans*; this time, if I get my way at least, the subtitle will be ‘Philosophy amid Ceaseless Technological Advance’. It is in this book that the solution to Llanera’s puzzle will be fully addressed, as the wider point of the positions I defended in the first book come into better focus. In *Meaningless*, my focus was on rehabilitating the question of the meaning of life, showing its connection to the mainstream of philosophy, and doing something concrete with these higher-order reflections by bringing them to bear on some central problems of philosophy, such as consciousness. That was already a lot to do, so it was practically inevitable that elements pertaining to my future direction of travel would appear as tensions. However, since Llanera has spotted this one, I shall address it now.

Now as Llanera says, for philosophers from Nietzsche to the French Existentialists, as well as for the likes of Dreyfus, Kelly and Taylor in the present day, ‘Nihilism is usually understood to have practical consequences for human beings that are bad’ (p. 83). She thinks that this contrasts with my ‘narrow conception of nihilism’ according to which it is ‘practically neutral’ (p. 82). Actually, I think this practical neutrality is where the worry has always lain, and that my nihilism, somewhat paradoxically on the surface, inherits the activity of the need to overcome nihilism which these thinkers felt and still feel; and yet it is better directed, both metaphysically and given our current circumstances. Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger saw their world changing; faster than ever before. The driver of this was technology, which changes how people live and has evident, and hence alarming, destructive powers. They saw the old, traditional order, in which religion governed people’s lives to maintain

conservative ways of life, being swept away. They thought of this as nihilism: a literal void in the place of the old values. They perceived the practical neutrality of nihilism as a threat; the old values, which maintained a way of life by telling us how to live, were being replaced by nothing at all: nihilism was an absence of all practical guidance. The result of its onset, they thought, would be the chaos of ‘anything goes’; and through some spurious reasoning, to my mind, this was sometimes thought to apply so generally as to render even truth a dubious notion.

As I see it, then, it was the neutral passivity of nihilism that spurred these thinkers to action. The enduring influence of religion, according to which nihilism is a negative evaluation, portrayed it as obviously bad for them, but it was its inability to provide positive evaluative guidance – because, in my view, it is not evaluative at all – which was the real worry. So nihilism needed to be overcome; or at least, we needed to learn how to live with it. Perhaps, as Nietzsche thought, with his strong antipathy to the religious values that nihilism was replacing with nothing at all, this presented an opportunity to create new and better values. Or perhaps, as Heidegger thought, philosophical reflection could get us back in touch with our Being, and thereby reaffirm the traditional ways of life which nihilism was threatening; we needed to take decisive action and not allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security by the unthinking crowd – and we needed to do this in a manner historically attuned to our heritage and our integral belonging to the natural world. I find some combination of making our own new values, or getting back in touch with the old ones without the need for support from religious institutions, in all of these thinkers. It continues to this day with the likes of Dreyfus and Kelly, who want to put us back in touch with the compelling ‘flow’ of the old ways. In all such cases, the passivity of nihilism is the problem, whether recognised or not, and the new authority we are supposed to need is found in our individual and collective resolute will, our oneness with nature, our cultural heritage, or some combination thereof. In these ways, we recapture the significance of the world which was lost with nihilism.

It seems to me, however, that in light of the violent history of our species, we have weathered the decline in institutionalised religious authority remarkably well. Nations of atheists have lived perfectly ordinary lives. In fact, we have now reached the point where we are just as likely to hear the ills of this world being blamed upon the influence, rather than lack of influence, of organised religion. I do not think the cataclysmic breakdown of order which these thinkers feared either happened, or is ever likely to happen; the idea was in large part a prediction,



for which a remedy was urgently sought, but its main effect seems to have been to provide inspiration to the arts – sometimes good, sometimes not so. Perhaps some of the philosophical remedies, such as relying upon our heritage, did transpire in a way; but overwhelmingly through muddling along, not because the philosophers thought of it. For philosophy, along with religion, was also in decline in this period. True, nihilism was not widely embraced. Atheism was, however, and they are only a short step from each other; but I think philosophy is harder to give up on than religion, given that religion always embodies a philosophy of one kind or another. Nevertheless, the fact that people typically continued to think they were living meaningful lives – by learning to think that you could make your life meaningful in any way you liked, or else to disparage the notion of the meaning of life, and thereby avoid thinking about it – strikes me as an intellectual epiphenomenon to what was really going on. Essentially, large numbers of people started living with nihilism, and in the moral sphere, which is what most concerned the likes of Nietzsche, nothing much changed. Decent nihilists wanted the same kind of things as decent religious believers; and the restraint which belief in the meaning of life was supposed to exercise on non-decent types was no longer terribly effective anyway, to the extent that it ever had been.

In light of what transpired, I think it is reasonable to conclude, with hindsight, that nihilism itself was never really the problem. The problem was rather the symbiotic rise of technology and fall of philosophy. Technology started becoming really impressive, religious belief declined as living standards improved, scientific culture arose to fill the void, and philosophy, struggling to find its place in this new world, turned in on itself and fell into decline. The philosophers who worried about nihilism should really have been worrying about the fact that the touchpaper of technology had finally been ignited after centuries of preparatory work, thereby precipitating rapid decline in the philosophical context required to make it safe. It all came in the same package, and although their moral concerns with nihilism were hardly irrelevant, and fully understandable at the time, what they failed to see was that by targeting nihilism – at a time when the meaning of life issue had no other credible place to go – they were actually targeting philosophy, and thereby contributing to the problem. For to think about, and embrace, nihilism, is to adopt a philosophical attitude to the world. The passionate activity of their opposition to nihilism should really have been directed to the preservation of philosophy, in the face of technological advances bringing awesome forces into the world on the basis of little more than blind curiosity, luck,

and market forces – and thereby practically every dream humans have ever dreamt, regardless of the wisdom of fulfilling them. For without philosophical guidance, when we see a way to do it, we do it. Research ethics committees, increasingly populated by scientists, cannot hold back the tide for long; for we simply do not live in a philosophical enough world for that anymore.

That is why the deep personal resonance of nihilism is something to be cultivated. This resonance will not inspire any particular kind of action, because nihilism is not evaluative. However it can help to draw people into philosophy; so strongly that scientific culture will have an uphill battle trying to combat it. And once they are drawn in, and start thinking about our world within a wider context which scientific culture tries to discredit – about what to do with this life we have found ourselves with, and how much technological power we can realistically handle – then plenty of action should be inspired. These practical consequences will not spring from nihilism *per se*, but rather from an incompatibility between feeling its resonance and remaining blind to philosophy. What Llanera calls the ‘intimate, powerful, and transformative effect’ of nihilism (p. 88) is nothing other than openness to a philosophical thought of immediate and universal interest. And we have never been in more need of such openness, with the ‘Doomsday Clock’ posted by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* currently giving us three minutes until oblivion, and scientists around the world diligently working away to spring a massive portfolio of new, life-transforming technologies upon us, of the kind which regularly make the news these days. So this is how Llanera’s puzzle is resolved; and I think I have already said enough to reveal how I would answer her more specific objections and queries, since they are all firmly rooted in this puzzle. I did not provide her with the resources to resolve the puzzle herself (Holmes might disagree), but the fact that it was the principle focus of her reading of my book is enough to leave me keenly anticipating the publication of her own positive views on these matters.

## References

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## Living in the Frame

### Meaning on Loan from Nihilism

Alan Malachowski\*

#### Abstract

This article suggests that James Tartaglia's otherwise interesting and insightful handling of the relationship between nihilism and philosophical questions concerning the meaning of life may have underestimated the former. Invoking a mini-tradition based on a Heideggarian reading of Nietzsche's 'European Nihilism' as mainly expressed in *The Will to Power*, it outlines four possible perspectives from which Tartaglia's conception of nihilism is liable to seem too complacent regarding its power to undermine the meaning we are inclined to attach to social life.

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*,<sup>1</sup> James Tartaglia cuts through misconceptions about the nature and consequences of nihilism that have dogged philosophical discussions over the years. And, he does this in a crisp, insightful, and often entertaining, way – one that should help refresh interest in issues concerning the meaning of life, while helping overcome the long prevailing tendency of analytic philosophers in particular to ignore such issues, or just shuffle them around in a pedestrian manner. The upshot is a timely, insightful book, the main thrust of which I am disposed, and even feel I *ought* to be so disposed, to largely agree with.

If we accept, as the book argues, that human beings have autonomy regarding the requirements for a meaningful life within the social realm, and that they are able to endow their own lives and the lives of others with meaning therein, we ought to set aside otiose questions, as commonly inspired by nihilism, concerning whether meaning in some other, overarching, sense exists or is even possible. We should rather spend the time identifying useful ways to exercise some quality control over meaning's dispensation and growth in social life, so as to avoid the trap of accepting just any old thing as meaningful. For this can only cheapen a cluster of very useful, closely associated, evaluations:

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<sup>1</sup> *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness, and Reality*. James Tartaglia, Bloomsbury: New York, 2016. Page references to this edition are given in brackets throughout.

“purposeful”, “valuable”, “authentic”, and so on. Thinking along these lines, it strikes me James is quite right to contend that the threat nihilism poses to the meanings we are inclined to attribute to our lives is bogus, something philosophical reflection can as easily dispense with.

When we are involved in projects and relationships we find worthwhile, and which others are liable to endorse, then we can generally have confidence that the life we are living is meaningful. And, philosophical deliberations along the lines James expounds should only enhance that confidence by drawing any sting nihilism might otherwise be perceived to have. For, it is highly unlikely that any *external* criterion of meaning, one that would have to override well established criteria which already mesh with the experiences of people who also engage in such projects and relationships, is going to possess the authority, natural or otherwise, to undermine this confidence.

Moreover there is something fishy in the very thought that such a criterion *could* serve such a purpose. Although, as James rightly accepts, sincere questions concerning whether life has meaning ought not to be denied a hearing on narrow semantic grounds (e.g. because such questions supposedly lack sense), obedience to a nihilistic external criterion, one that excludes or undermines social meaning *should* raise serious semantic concerns. The idea of such a criterion involves semantic incoherence: under the weight of an alien notion of exclusion, the language within which *we* talk about social meaning would begin to lose its sense. And, this would have a knock on effect. How can we then accept such a criterion, since the language in which it has to be expressed no longer makes sense to us?

What is doing the work here is an intriguing assumption about the connection between what we believe and semantic meaning: it is not possible for such meaning to retain its significance if too many of our beliefs turn out to be false.<sup>2</sup> Hence if, *per impossible*, we are completely mistaken about meaning in the *non-semantic* senses just alluded to – so our many, and various, judgments about what is valuable, worthwhile, authentic, and so on are all radically mistaken – then there is no way we can *understand that they are*. The language in which this state of affairs has to be expressed will be opaque. Linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘assumption’ is Donald Davidson’s, who contends that belief, meaning, and truth are interdependent and cannot be pulled too far apart without causing the kind of problems we mention. See *The Essential Davidson*, Donald Davidson, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006, especially pp.116-7 & 205-7.

meanings are holistically interwoven: they feed each other. If very large chunks of our beliefs are false then the words and phrases involved turn out to be meaningless, and language usage as a whole is irreparably damaged, leaving meaning in general destroyed. A totally meaningless life would, it appears, be one we could not contemplate, still less talk about. Having said that, I am, nevertheless, going to think against James' treatment of nihilism which should, of course, also involve some thinking against my own views.

The question I am going to focus on is simply this: "Does nihilism have more teeth than James allows it to have?" On the face of it, there is something of a paradox lurking here anyway. If nihilism has *no* teeth, if it is harmless, "morally neutral", and "simply a fact", with "no practical consequences" as James contends (e.g. 171 & 172), it is pretty uninteresting. For then, its domestication is cheap – more or less self-financing, while James' key claims:

- (1) Nihilism is true: life *is* meaningless.
- (2) Despite (1), our lives can, and presumably should, be carried on in the normal way because the things we do are worthwhile and serviceably meaningful in a social sense.

become trivial. But, if nihilism *has* teeth, it is not clear how both of these can still stand. James fully acknowledges that, historically, nihilism *appears* to have had teeth, but contends that this is a highly deceptive appearance, caused, in the main, by (1) falsely believing that meaning needs to be undergirded by religion, and (2) conflating 'meaninglessness' of a certain lofty kind with 'lack of social value.' Here again, though, a chimerical nihilism that is so easily de-fanged seems hardly worth much serious consideration.

The problem, if there is one, is perhaps structurally reminiscent of the once much discussed difficulties many philosophers had with swallowing John Mackie's view that the second-order characterization of moral values as 'non-objective' ("There are no objective values"<sup>3</sup>) need have no negative influence on genuine commitments to the first-order judgments involved in moral practices. But, I am not going to dwell on such considerations.

Instead, I want to look more closely at why, contrary to James' fairly relaxed dismissal of nihilism as an innocuous philosophical phantom, there emerged a

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<sup>3</sup> *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie, Penguin: London, 1991, p.15.

tradition that considered it unnervingly real, and monumentally threatening. My hunch here is that perhaps the ‘tradition’ was on to something which James overlooks despite the close, and at times perspicuous, attention he has paid to a number of the main works of its proponents.

In exploring this tradition, it should become clear that James’ reasons (interesting and useful though they otherwise may be) for claiming nihilism probably *has to be true, and harmlessly so*,<sup>4</sup> fail to allow for the devastation that a genuinely threatening nihilism, one such as Nietzsche dubbed “the eeriest of all guests”,<sup>5</sup> is liable to have wreaked, and is likely to continue to wreak, on everything we can regard as meaningful. Having outlined the nihilism involved, we will discuss how it squares up to James’ notion of a meaningful life in what he calls “the framework” or “the frame”. This is a social context which bestows meaning not on *everything* as such (which is impossible), but on everything in that context: “if we want to understand the meaning of a particular practice, we do so by framing it within the wider context of social life” (70).<sup>6</sup>

### **A nihilist tradition: Nietzsche and Heidegger**

*With regard to the essence of nihilism, there is no  
prospect of, and no meaningful claim to, a cure.*  
Heidegger

In talking about a “tradition” here, I should make it clear that I am setting aside the rich history of nihilism which includes, for example, its socio-political role in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia and numerous related literary sources such as Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, as well as most of Dostoyevsky’s novels including *Notes From Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Instead, I want to deal with a very narrow *philosophical* tradition, a sort of

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<sup>4</sup> James submits that to confirm life itself has meaning we would need to show how humans came to exist, and do this in a way that is compatible with the view that this existence has a purpose within a world that has a purpose.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaufmann (see 11) translates “unheimlichsten” as “uncanniest”, but here I prefer David Krell’s “eeriest” (see 17), not least because ‘the human being’ is dubbed “the uncanniest” in an excellent translation of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger, Gregory Freid and Richard Polt (trans), Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000 (henceforth ‘IM’).

<sup>6</sup> Though the notions of ‘enframing’ and ‘frame/framework’ are clear enough, and do not seem to require any pumping up, theoretically speaking, it might have been instructive to see how they compare with John Searle’s well known concepts of the ‘background’ and ‘network’.

‘sub-tradition’ of the tradition I have so far been alluding to that, for the most part, reduces to virtually only two key thinkers: Nietzsche and Heidegger. Indeed, as far as the points that are intended to tell against James’ conception of nihilism go, this tradition shrinks even further, down to a mini-Heideggerian tradition of reading Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche’s version of nihilism, though complex, is frequently interpreted as a hyperbolic depiction-cum-prediction of the *socio-psychological* consequences of the death of God, as announced by the ‘madman’ in Section 125 of *The Gay Science*.<sup>8</sup> James, himself, seems content to buy this interpretation, as when he suggests Nietzsche’s “mistake was to believe that a wave of nihilistic psychology was about to engulf the world” (171-172). But, Nietzsche’s concerns, one ought to hesitate to say “fears”, about the advent of nihilism are more complicated. The extremely dark picture he paints of its putative fallout serves as a dramatic device designed to draw attention to the importance of his underlying claim that *historically speaking*, and regardless of surface social outcomes and our felt responses, nihilism has us by the throat. By “us” he means the people of “Western History” – and, his nihilism is therefore what he calls ‘European’.<sup>9</sup>

Nietzsche can speak for himself, and speak well. But, he shouts far too often,<sup>10</sup> and in my view the resulting ‘megaphonic’ effect tends to obscure the subtlety and importance of this underlying claim, even to the extent of encouraging confusion over the import of a phrase like “historically speaking”.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a much wider tradition in recent European thought, involving thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo and Vittorio Possenti, (not to mention Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida) that is strongly influenced by Nietzsche’s views on nihilism, though the degree to which Heidegger’s interpretation of them is accepted varies considerably. A common factor, however, is the belief that nihilism is a force to be reckoned with largely on account of the writings of both Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is beyond the scope of the present article to consider how James’ approach to nihilism compares with that of this wider tradition. That he does not engage with this tradition by explaining why its members are wrong to take nihilism so seriously is perhaps an unfortunate lacuna given that he refers to both Heidegger and Nietzsche – and not always in passing.

<sup>8</sup> *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (Bernard Williams, ed.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> “By ‘us’ and ‘we’, Nietzsche means the man of Western History”, (NIV43). Along with Heidegger, my use of the present day “we” assumes the current inhabitants of the West are “the contemporary representatives of Nietzsche’s era” (NIV44).

<sup>10</sup> A quick survey of other commentators on this point reveals an interesting contrast. R. J. Hollindale, one of Nietzsche’s main early translators disagrees with me. After remarking on “the *excess* of manner” of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Hollingdale claims that “excess is the one fault no one could impute to Nietzsche’s subsequent works”, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (R. J. Hollingdale (trans.)), Penguin: London, 1969, p.11. Simon Blackburn, however, asserts that Nietzsche “had no volume control”; *Truth*, Simon Blackburn, Penguin: London, 2006, p.77.

Fortunately, we can turn for illumination to an inveterate reader of Nietzsche who knows how to speak softly, even though he is also prone to overdo the philosophical dramatics.

Heidegger seems to have first broached the question as to what lies behind, what “grounds”, the nihilism which he says was “exposed” by Nietzsche “in the first book of *The Will to Power*”<sup>11</sup> during a lecture given in 1935.<sup>12</sup> But there, his brief remarks are tied up in some obscure thoughts about “nothing/the nothing” (*das nichts*). And, his stark definition

“Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being<sup>13</sup> – that is nihilism.”<sup>14</sup>

merely reiterates his habitual insistence that just about everything that can go seriously wrong for human beings is the result of their ignorance of ‘how things stand with Being’. Later, however, at length and in a variety of other works,<sup>15</sup> he uncoils a complex and nuanced account of Nietzsche’s approach to nihilism

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<sup>11</sup> *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Random House: New York, 1968. All references give page numbers for this volume using the abbreviation ‘WP’ followed by the section number and then the page number.

<sup>12</sup> IM, pp.26-7.

<sup>13</sup> No attempt is made throughout to define “Being” since the content of Heidegger’s notion is irrelevant to the main contentions here. Such a definition would be difficult in any case because there is no scholarly consensus on this issue. I have some sympathy with Richard Rorty’s view that “Being is a good example of something we have no criteria for answering questions about”, ‘Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism’, p.36; in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991, pp.27-49. At the same time, I am not yet convinced that Peter van Inwagen is completely wrong when he claims Heidegger’s philosophy of being is “transparently confused”, ‘Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment’, p.475, n.4; in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, David J. Chalmers, David Manley, Ryan Wasserman (eds.), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009, pp.472-506. Matters have been made even more complicated by Thomas Sheehan’s intervention with what he claims to be a ‘paradigm shift in Heideggerian interpretation’. There he argues forcefully that Heidegger’s talk of ‘Being’ can be cashed out in terms of ‘meaning.’ See: ‘A paradigm shift in Heidegger research’, Thomas Sheehan, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 34, 2001, pp.183-2002. Obviously if Sheehan is right, then the content of ‘Being’ would impact the present article. It need not, however, necessitate any large changes in the basic claims regarding James’ approach to nihilism. I am skeptical that Sheehan is right, if only because of the puzzle it causes for Heidegger’s use of the phrase “the meaning of ‘Being’” throughout *Being and Time*.

<sup>14</sup> IM, p.217

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger’s engagement with Nietzsche’s nihilism is distributed over a large number of other works, but the views I discuss are not, to my knowledge, substantially contradicted or made obsolescent in any of those. Aspects of his similarly deep and wide-ranging engagement with the poet Hölderlin resonate with Heidegger’s treatment of Nietzsche’s nihilism, but touch on matters again beyond the scope of the present discussion. The same can be said of Ernst Junger.



that sparkles with creative insights, while, at the same, adding a measure of deeper coherence which vividly highlights fault lines in less imaginatively penetrating interpretations.

We will take our bearings from just two of these works: ‘Nietzsche’s Word: “God is Dead”’ (hereafter ‘NW’)<sup>16</sup> and *Nietzsche Vols. I-IV*: (hereafter ‘NI’, ‘NII’, etc.),<sup>17</sup> using the second mainly for backup, and elaboration. The aim here is to show how nihilism, as elucidated by Heidegger, still bears out the once-threatening connotations of its name tag, and cannot easily be made compatible with James’ view that life in the frame remains, and deserves to remain, untouched and hence unperturbed by it. As an enemy of the grounding that enables and sustains worthwhile social meaning, this nihilism should be recognized for what it is, and not be given shelter by way of philosophical appeasement.

One of Heidegger’s first interpretational moves in NW is to stress that Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism is *historical*: “His thinking sees itself under the sign of nihilism. That is the name for an historical movement” (NW160) ... “Nietzsche comprehends nihilism as a historical process” (NW166) ... “The essence of nihilism is rooted in history” (NW 197). Moreover, this ‘thinking’ “gives the destiny of two millennia of Western history” for “after dominating the previous century” nihilism “has determined the current one” (NW160) . Such claims already invite obvious objections of historical inaccuracy (e.g. the ‘mistake’ that James refers to). But, Heidegger is using the term “history” in a special sense. He equates it with *metaphysics*, so ordinary criteria for empirical accuracy do not apply.

This means we should not treat the so-called madman’s announcement literally.<sup>18</sup> Again, it is rhetorically devised, this time to capture the attention of

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<sup>16</sup> Reprinted in *Off the Beaten Track*, Martin Heidegger, (Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, trans.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002, pp.157-199 (hereafter ‘OTB’).

<sup>17</sup> *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, Martin Heidegger, (David Farrell Krell, trans.), HarperCollins: New York, 1991, and *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four*, Martin Heidegger, (David Farrell Krell, trans.), HarperCollins: New York, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> This has not gone unnoticed by other commentators. Megill, for example, tells us that “Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God, should not be mistaken for an empirical observation concerning the decline of Christian belief in the nineteenth century ... In announcing the death of God, Nietzsche is declaring his conviction that the present is in a state of dereliction.” *Prophets of Extremity*, Alan Megill, University of California Press: California, Berkeley, 1987, p.33. But, Heidegger’s reading is exceptionally insightful as to *why* a purely ‘empirical’ interpretation is wrong, and shows why the ‘dereliction’ Megill refers to cannot be adequately discussed in just empirical terms either. In his introduction to *The Gay Science*, Bernard Williams also briefly notes that Nietzsche was not just concerned with the fallout from the God’s death but from the lapse of any “reassuring metaphysical

those who have no inkling when the ground shifting beneath their feet is symptomatic of a *metaphysical* earthquake. Heidegger is as firm as he is clear about this. Nietzsche is not just describing the consequences of the collapse of Christianity or even Christian faith: “Nietzsche uses the names “God” and “Christian God” to indicate the *supersensory world in general ... the metaphysical world*” (NW162, italics added). In NIV, Heidegger emphasizes the same point, but unpacks it in more direct detail:<sup>19</sup>

‘Christian God’ also stands for the ‘transcendent’ in general in its various meanings – for ‘ideals’ and ‘norms’. ‘principles’ and ‘rules’, ‘ends’ and ‘values’ which are set above the being in order to give being as a whole a purpose, an order, and – As it is succinctly expressed – ‘*meaning*’ ((NIV4) italics added).

And in NW, the outcome of God’s death, construed in these broader terms, is spelled out:

If God – as the supersensory ground and as the goal of everything that is real – is dead, if the supersensory world of ideas is bereft of its binding and above all its inspiring and constructive power, then there is nothing left which man can rely on and by which he can orientate himself (NW163).

However, Heidegger stresses that neither belief nor disbelief in religious or secular transcendent sources of ‘orientation’ is sufficient to indicate how someone, or, more to the point, a culture, ‘stands’ with regard to nihilism. To find that out, we must dig deeper.

Nihilism “is not just any view or doctrine held by just anyone” (NW163). It operates, as ‘a historical movement’ below the threshold of ordinary beliefs. At first sight, Heidegger makes this sound mysterious:

Nihilism moves history in the way of a scarcely recognized fundamental process in the destiny of the Western peoples. Hence nihilism is not just

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structure of the world”, *op.cit.* p.xiii.

<sup>19</sup> There is a good deal of overlap and repetition as between NW and NI-IV. In each case, I use the source that is felicitous for the purposes in hand.

one historical phenomenon among others .... Nihilism thought in its essence, is on the contrary the fundamental movement of the history of the West. Its roots are so deep that its development can entail only world catastrophes. Nihilism is the world-historical movement of the peoples of the earth who have been drawn in to modernity's arena of power (NW163-164) .... Nihilism, as the fundamental process of Western history, is also and above all the intrinsic law of this history ... its inner logic" (NW167).

But, even as it stands, this passage provides important clues as to why the consequences of nihilism are liable to be misconstrued, especially by someone who, unaware of its metaphysical depth, believes it to be patently inoffensive. Nihilism is not easy to spot at work. Its roots are deeply submerged, and it operates undercover as an "intrinsic law" or "inner logic". These characteristics help explain why, as Heidegger more than once claims, the effects of nihilism are often mistaken for its cause, and why its most important feature, its 'essence' (*das Wesen*)<sup>20</sup> in his elevated terms, is invariably ignored (even Nietzsche himself slips up here, but a bit more about that shortly).

On the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche put forward so far, we have the bare bones of an explanation as to why those who are unable to detect visible signs of 'world catastrophes' not clearly caused by quotidian events might be mistaken in considering this sufficient evidence that Nietzsche was wrong about the ominous nature and dire repercussions of nihilism. But, to cast even a shadow over James' view that, beneath the fierce face commonly projected onto it, nihilism is benign, we need more. We need to see *how* nihilism can threaten meaning and *that it does*. And, we need to give some substance to the idea that what might seem to be no more than an imaginary form of metaphysical terrorism has a real impact.

The Heideggerian story we are unfolding, convoluted as it is, eventually leads us to four different vantage points, or outposts, from which James' take on nihilism looks complacent. For reasons of space, we will need some shortcuts to get to these.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'Essence' is a Heideggerian term of art that he does not, as far as I am aware, define (even when he asks himself directly what it means – e.g. NIV206). Here, I take "the essence of X" just to mean something like "what is most important about X" – though Heidegger's uses "essence" so often that he tends to undermine the even the kind of 'importance' alluded to in this particular interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> For example, we circumvent the doctrine of 'Eternal recurrence' which Heidegger, probably rightly,

Viewed from the first vantage point, that of the Heideggerian Nietzsche, *our world* has no value: “Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking ... the categories ‘aim,’ ‘unity,’ ‘being’ which we used to project some value into the world – we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*” (WP12, 13). In such a world, life in the frame can only embody superficial meanings, the equivalent of moral flotsam. The second vantage point reveals how things look through Nietzsche’s own eyes: again value disappears, and although the possibility of revival through a new form of valuation is broached, this turns out to be a Trojan Horse according to Heidegger. The third vantage point is occupied Heidegger himself. From there, the human situation looks worse than Nietzsche envisaged: nihilism has engulfed our lives, draining them of not just meaning, but also the resources for escaping from, or overcoming, the value vacuum. And, by way of conclusion, the view from the last outpost shows briefly how Heidegger’s verdict on the plight of “those drawn into the arena of modernity’s power”, and hence into nihilism on his terms, might be extrapolated from his reflections on Nietzsche without deploying either bespoke Heideggerian philosophical apparatus/terminology or tendentious assumptions about the priority of issues concerning ‘Being’. This way of reaching the verdict invokes what, following Richard Rorty,<sup>22</sup> we might call “Heideggerian common sense”.

## Heideggerian Nietzsche

*Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism is itself nihilistic.*

Heidegger

For Heideggerian Nietzsche, metaphysics is the motor of human history, the only kind of history in which meaning can reside (because it is *metaphysical* not, as James would presumably prefer, because it is *human*). This is tantamount to saying that metaphysics creates the human appreciation of order and unity within and amongst entities and events on the world stage, as well as the subsequent basis for evaluations of them. How can it do this? Well recall, history

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says is Nietzsche’s fundamental metaphysical position. Adequate treatment of this would take far too long, and also take us too far away from James’ text.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Heideggerianism and Leftist Politics’, Richard Rorty; in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, Santiago Zabala (ed.), McGill-Queen’s University Press: Canada, 2007, pp.149-58.

is *metaphysically infused*. Metaphysics is not just something *behind* it: “We are not thinking of a doctrine or only of a specialized discipline of philosophy but of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety” (NW165). Even so, there is a sticky surface incongruity: metaphysics belongs to the supersensory world *and* manages to exert a ‘determinative and supporting’ effect on what happens in the sensory world. This latter claim about the world-historical potency of metaphysics, one Heidegger is determined to make on Nietzsche’s behalf, apparently introduces an anomaly akin to that of Cartesian dualism: how can the ‘supersensory’ influence the ‘sensory’?

In discussing the view from our fourth outpost, we will suggest a way of re-describing metaphysics’ relationship to the sensory world that allows for straightforward causal influences. But, Heidegger does not see a problem here either, though for different reasons. Humans who lead meaningful lives always lean on and are guided in their actions, consciously or otherwise, by a metaphysics that provides them with a general sense of “the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety”. This is not just something they are inclined to fall back on whenever they are, as Dostoyevsky puts it, “striving to unite the details of existence and to discover at least some kind of general meaning in the universal muddle”.<sup>23</sup> For on that conception, metaphysics seeps into, and gives motivational shape to, *everything* they do. It is not operating from the supersensory realm, but within the history that it shapes. The dualistic dilemma is simply an illusion that vanishes when this becomes clear and the idea of a supersensory realm is redundant, and can no longer play a credible role.

Nietzsche’s great, and terrible, discovery, Heidegger tells us, is that the metaphysics which has been driving history since the time of Plato is unremittingly self-destructive. For the *values* it gave birth to, are fated to issue challenges to the legitimacy of both themselves and any would-be replacements. These are challenges that cannot be met.

Taking the high estimation of truth as a test case, as Nietzsche himself does, we can quickly see how Christian doctrines would succumb to self-destruction given their weak evidential basis (the high estimation of truth bringing in tow urgent demands for strong evidence): “The sense of truthfulness, developed highly by Christianity, is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world and of history (WP 2, 7) .... If on a Sunday

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<sup>23</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, (David McDuff, trans.) Penguin: London, 2003, p.9.

morning we hear the old church bells chiming, we ask ourselves: is it really possible! This is on account of a Jew crucified two thousand years ago who said that he was the son of God. There is no proof for such an assertion”<sup>24</sup>. And, Nietzsche suggests that this kind of scenario, where disbelief is the inevitable result of rudimentary questioning, plays out for morality in general:

Morality was the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism*. But among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its genealogy, its partial perspective. (WP 4, 5 (10))

Heidegger speaks, as we said, of ‘destiny’, ‘intrinsic law of history’, ‘inner logic’, and so forth, thus depicting metaphysical activity as something shielded from ordinary scrutiny, as we also indicated. But, we do not need a clearer view of the details of that activity to see why Heidegger wanted to say that when Nietzsche moved beyond the generality of morality *in toto*, and identified the operative metaphysics of the Western world in the even wider terms of *values*, this metaphysics should be regarded as nihilistic. For values were also self-undermining. They could not withstand the force of the insight, already part of their inbuilt logic as it were, that the idealized world they represented, or promised, would never be actualized: “The highest values have already devalued themselves now by coming to understand that the ideal world is not, and not ever, going to be realized within the real world” (NW167) – and not only that, but the *value of the highest values*, the obligatory basis of sincere commitments to them, runs up against the discovery that the “true world (the “transcendent”, the beyond) has been fabricated solely out of ‘psychological needs’” (NIV34) .

At the conclusion of the process of the highest values undermining themselves lies a valueless world, a world in which nihilism therefore reigns. Of course, two key assumptions need to dominate here: (1) a world without value is a world without meaning: “‘Meaning’ signifies the same thing as value, since in place of ‘meaninglessness’, Nietzsche also says ‘valuelessness’” (NIV30), and (2) values are homogeneous, so *all* worthwhile values lose their currency absent the creditworthiness of the higher values: “If these uppermost values, which grant all beings their value, are devalued, then all beings grounded in them

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<sup>24</sup> *Human All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (Gary Hanwerk (trans.)), Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 113, p.93 (hereafter: HAH).

become valueless” (NIV30). The end of the devaluation process is not however the end of Nietzsche’s own story, but it is the place where Heidegger parts company from him. Before we discuss the significance of these points, we need to touch base with James’ handling of Nietzsche in his approach to nihilism.

James gestures towards the richness of Nietzsche’s nihilism (36), but targets his discussion on a thinner version that is no threat to meaning as he conceives it, cannot be overcome by us, and need not be overcome because “we have no reason to want to” do so (28). He thinks this is a good idea because Nietzsche’s nihilism is inextricably tied to at least two bad ideas: (1) that European culture had been embroiled in a long term crisis caused by nihilism, and was heading towards a climacteric phase which we now occupy (“What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*” (WP3)), and (2) that meaning is intimately connected to a religious outlook on life.<sup>25</sup> James is skeptical about (1), apparently regarding it as more or less bogus history and unverifiable prophecy. But here, he misses something we have just discussed: the real catastrophe, the one Heideggerian Nietzsche is concerned about, is *metaphysical* for which ordinary talk about cultural calamity and disaster is rhetorical window dressing, serving as a contingent indicator of the more severe underlying problem. This is one of the reasons, as Heidegger often points out, Nietzsche does not dwell on ordinary historical details: “Nowhere does Nietzsche identify any historically recognized and demonstrable forms of the positing of the uppermost values, nor the historically representable contexts of such positings (NIV35) ... for a comprehension of the essence of nihilism there is little to be gained by recounting the history of nihilism in different centuries and depicting its different forms” (NIV53). As for (2), James’ swift suggestion that we can show how ineffectual nihilism is by simply severing the connection between meaning and religion (for this will leave meaning unscathed) fails to acknowledge that such a move cannot thwart Nietzsche’s ‘richer nihilism’, which depends not on tight links between meaning and religion, but between meaning and ‘the transcendent in general’. Nihilism begins to bite when a metaphysics that caters for ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’ has no operational

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<sup>25</sup> A third reason would presumably be that Nietzsche’s nihilism is tied to the doctrine of ‘Eternal Recurrence’ that James regards as absurd. For reasons of brevity, as we said, we do not discuss this doctrine here, but simply assume what we say about Nietzsche’s nihilism independently of it still holds up.

existence within culture. Life in the frame is always lacking in that regard. For, it is invariably dominated by the antics of the ‘herd’ (Nietzsche) or the ‘They’ (Heidegger), the *mobile vulgus*, the people who are manipulated by popular culture, banal politics, and prejudices masquerading as opinions – and it is therefore bound to forfeit stability:

The real disadvantage that the cessation of metaphysical views brings with it lies in the fact that the individual keeps his eye too strictly upon his short lifespan and receives no stronger impulses to build durable institutions designed to last for centuries; he wants to pick the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and he therefore no longer cares to plant those trees that require centuries of constant cultivation and are intended to shade a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence still *contrasts* too strongly with the deeply breathing repose of metaphysical ages. (HAH 22, p.32).

### Through Nietzsche’s own eyes

*What does Nihilism mean? – That the highest values are losing their value.*  
Nietzsche

A world without value is still a world, so Nietzsche’s account of nihilism does not come to a halt when the ‘higher values’ self destruct: “The earth-shattering change behind the devaluation of the highest values hitherto is revealed in the fact that a *new principle of valuation* becomes necessary” (NIV49). Humans can no longer rely on their judgments as to what is, and what is not, worthwhile, but Nietzsche believes this only signals the *completion*, not the triumph, of nihilism. He identifies something that he believes counters nihilism, something he calls ‘the will to power’. This cannot be thwarted or undermined by nihilism because it does not depend on anything that can be undermined. And, it does not depend on anything of that kind because it does not depend on *anything* (even itself). Nor is it professed to occupy the supersensory realms, such as ‘the true world’, that nihilism ‘exposes’ as fraudulent.

Unlike morality and the higher values in general, the will to power is not destined for self-destruction in virtue of its own nature. If anything, its trajectory



is self-reinforcing. It strives to overcome itself, but in doing so only becomes stronger (because a greater force is required to do this). Nick Land graphically captures how the will to power elusively offers nothing for nihilism to bite into:

The will to power is not driven by the tendency to realize and sustain a potential, its sole impetus is that of overcoming itself. It has no motivating end, but only a propulsive source. It is in this sense that will to power is creative desire, without a pre-figured destination or anticipatory perfection. It is an arrow shot into the unconceived.<sup>26</sup>

Nihilism is defeated because values are so radically transformed in the process of willing, they become indestructible. The value of values then lies *in the willing* itself, and not in anything outside the domain of the will that is doomed to self-destruction or can be undermined.

James' treatment of nihilism has to seem complacent from this perspective, that of the special kind of person, *der Übermensch*, who has taken what Philippa Foot calls the "highly daring mental voyage",<sup>27</sup> and come to recognize that traditional values are bankrupt, that the will is the only unimpeachable source of what can replace them.<sup>28</sup> By comparison, life in the frame, lacking "deeply breathing repose", then has to look "agitated and ephemeral": a mundane, self-deceptive life; one that surfs routinely, without any overall sense of direction, on an ocean of disparate values, which are now no more than the detritus from the insidious eruption of a metaphysical volcano.

## Heidegger

*Insight into nihilism remains something terrifying.*  
Heidegger

For Heidegger, Nietzsche's nihilism has some promising features up to the

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<sup>26</sup> *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, Nick Land, Routledge: London, 2002, p.73.

<sup>27</sup> 'Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values', Philippa Foot, p.210; in *Nietzsche*, John Richardson and Brian Leiter (eds.), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001, pp.210-220.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Richardson: 'The human becomes overman by grasping himself as will to power, and putting this insight into effect by making new values', *Heidegger*, John Richardson, Routledge: London, 2012, p.246.

point where the will to power is introduced as a countermeasure. Then, in Heidegger's terms and to his great dismay, Being is utterly reduced to mere matters of value: "For Heidegger, Being is annihilated insofar as it is transformed completely into value".<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger ruminates extensively on the nature of value and valuing (e.g. NIV 15-16), questioning, for instance, what makes a value 'valid'. In doing this he invites further questions as to whether Nietzsche's model of valuing as sheer willing in a social vacuum without an extrinsic aim or object is at all cogent. But, he passes up on these, preferring to concentrate on the consequences of assuming the model *is* viable, or certainly not incoherent. Heidegger has two main problems with these consequences, and believes that they feed into a much larger problem.

The first difficulty is that, far from countering nihilism, the notion of 'a will to power' remains caught up in its underlying metaphysics: "the revaluation of all values, as a grounding of the principle for a new valuation, is itself metaphysics" (NIV6). And, this metaphysics "is not an overcoming of nihilism. It is the ultimate entanglement in nihilism" (NIV203). The supposed countermeasure to nihilism counter-productively, and ironically, empowers it – "ironically", because Nietzsche's 'completion of metaphysics' turns out to be nihilism's last stand.

The second problem is that a world transformed by the metaphysics of the will to power is one given over to "unconditional subjectivity" (NW191) and rampant self-assertion ("pure powerfulness without restraint" (NIV28)) through which all beings are objectified: "World becomes object", and "earth can show itself now only as the attack arranged in the willing of man ... nature appears everywhere as the object of technology" (NIV191). When awareness, conscious or otherwise, of the world's ungroundedness outside the will proliferates, it descends into darkness: "The time of the world's night is a desolate time because the desolation grows continually greater ... The age for which the ground fails to appear hangs in the abyss".<sup>30</sup>

Both problems feed into a larger problem, a problem which for Heidegger is paramount and therefore never absent throughout even his most protracted discussions of Nietzsche's nihilism: "Being, as a matter of principle is not admitted as Being" (NIV203). Crudely: Being is not given its due. This is the

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<sup>29</sup> *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics*. Gianni Vattimo, p.21.

<sup>30</sup> 'Why Poets?' Martin Heidegger, p.200; in OTB, pp.200-241.

very reason why entanglement in metaphysics is a problem in the first instance. In Heidegger's view, *all* Western metaphysics short changes Being ("In its essence, however, metaphysics is nihilism" (NW198)).

The second problem, unbridled objectification, which is the practical concomitant of Nietzsche's nihilism, fuels the larger problem because it creates a mechanically distracting world that blatantly "leaves Being unthought" (NIV212). Before we discuss whether these considerations might be problematic for James' notion of a toothless nihilism, we need to say a bit more about what is supposed to be going on here.

Heidegger credits Nietzsche with recognizing that the metaphysical underpinnings of successive societies in the West have contained the seeds of their own destruction, and hence have always been nihilistic.<sup>31</sup> But, he believes Nietzsche's attempt to thwart this inherent nihilism fails miserably because in its totalizing capacity (*everything* comes down to value and ultimately the 'willing' thereof), the attempt is itself metaphysical. At the same time, and Heidegger claims this all along, Nietzsche fails to engage the *essence* of nihilism.<sup>32</sup> This is a disastrous deficit.

For Heidegger, the rhetoric about nihilism's psychological and social upshot that Nietzsche both voices and encourages covers up the real threat that nihilism poses: the threat to Being. The path from the supersensory world to the will to power bypasses Being, creating a culture in which Being is reduced to nothing. Or, more accurately, the essence of nihilism is that it *eclipses* Being. "Eclipses" is apt because it is not that Being is *destroyed* as such – on my reading at least, Heidegger operates with a quasi conservation of Being principle (it can neither be created nor destroyed by human hand), but rather that is unable to reveal itself or be revealed: "The value-thinking of the metaphysics of the will to power is deadly in an extreme sense because it does not permit Being itself to come into the dawning" (NW196). It should perhaps be noted, however, that Heidegger's immense concern with 'how things stand with Being' leads him to darken his portrait of Nietzsche's nihilism. In his comprehensive study of Nietzsche's thought, Richard Schacht sketches a more optimistic portrait in which its transitional status is emphasized. This leads Nietzsche to regard nihilism as ultimately beneficial because it opens up possibilities for fresh

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<sup>31</sup> "Credits" is too weak. It is clear that Heidegger was often in awe of Nietzsche's insights.

<sup>32</sup> However, in NI, Heidegger praises Nietzsche's insights into the essence of Nihilism.

values and a new kind of human being, *der Übermensch*.<sup>33</sup>

How do things now ‘stand’ with regard to James’ view that, deceptive appearances aside, nihilism is ineffectual and can be profitably ignored? Historically, at least on Heidegger’s understanding, those who are, *even now*, creating meaning within ‘the frame’ are doing so during, or at least under the influence of, the Nietzschean epoch and hence in the dark, so to speak, because they are not witnessing the light of Being’s presence. But, why should James feel any need to respond to this? Or even take it seriously?

Heidegger believes that metaphysics grounds the intelligibility of the world, typically over long periods of time. In doing this, it both creates regions of intelligibility and conceals other such regions. Yet, it is destined to be exposed as nihilistic because it never does justice to ‘Being’. By contrast, James’ position seems to be that metaphysics *cannot* ground intelligibility on the grand scale Heidegger believes metaphysics aims for, but this is of little consequence because meaning within specific social contexts does not require such grounding. Metaphysics cannot underwrite the meaning of the world *as a whole* or, in Heidegger’s terms, “of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety”. It cannot do this because ‘the whole’ or ‘the fundamental structure’ has no meaning. Meaning is, so to speak, local, and floats free of concerns about globalized ‘grounding’. Being then drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss.

Richard Rorty has voiced some trenchant criticisms of what he regards as Heidegger’s gross over assessment of the power of philosophy in this connection, finding it preposterous that there should be any substantial connection between our current socio-political difficulties and metaphysics: “that our present troubles are somehow due to the Plato-Nietzsche tradition ..., that our fate is somehow linked to that tradition”.<sup>34</sup> As an accomplished Rorty scholar,<sup>35</sup> James

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<sup>33</sup> *Nietzsche*, Richard Schacht, Routledge: London, 1983, see especially pp.344-348.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey’, Richard Rorty, p.53; in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1982, pp.37-59. In an interesting discussion of the criticisms Rorty voiced both in this paper and in ‘Heidegger Against the Pragmatists’ (unpublished), David Krell concedes that major world events such as the First World War seem to be the upshot of “more a nexus of ineluctable and incomprehensible stupidities than anything one could define as “subjectivity”, “will-to-will”, “calculative thought”, or “*Ge-stell*”, but wonders “might not trade warfare, mobilization, *Realpolitik*, and all the rest, even the unbelievable bungling, conceal ‘some essential relation’ to the way Europeans think and have thought; and would it be utterly ingenuous to believe that the history of metaphysics has had at least ‘some essential relation’ to such thought?” *Intimations of Mortality: Time, Truth, and Finitude in Heidegger’s Thinking*, David Farrell Krell, Penn State University Press: Pennsylvania, 1990, p.167. Heidegger may be vulnerable to a

is no doubt aware of these, and may well feel that they simply buttress his own preference for keeping some distance from the narrow ‘tradition’ we have been discussing. But, this kind of criticism relegates metaphysics to philosophy, as if it is to be identified with particular doctrines, lines of argument and so forth, whereas, Heidegger claims, these are usually *the products of metaphysics*. Collapsing Heidegger’s distinction between metaphysics and particular philosophical doctrines blurs the bigger causal picture, making it look as if he was trying to say that specific philosophical views were the sole determinant of certain socio- historical outcomes. There are also other factors that Rorty’s, otherwise catchy and characteristically acute, objections ignore.

For, as Iain Thomson percipiently suggests, when Heidegger talks about the longer term influence of metaphysics, he can be usefully interpreted as subscribing to a thesis of *ontological holism*. This “leads him to the view that metaphysics does not just concern philosophers isolated in their ivory towers; on the contrary [it] grounds an age”.<sup>36</sup> Here, metaphysics involves underlying synoptic conceptions of the world which dictate what it is for things to be what they are, and in doing so play “a foundational role in establishing and maintaining our very sense of the intelligibility of all things, ourselves included ... metaphysics molds our very sense of what it means for something – anything – to be”.<sup>37</sup> Thomson makes Rorty’s objections less immediately compelling by clarifying Heidegger’s notion of ontotheology<sup>38</sup> so that it is easier to see (a) *how* metaphysics plays a grounding/foundational role for *ein Zeitalter* (“an age of time”), and then (b) *why* Heidegger insists that “Western humanity in all its comportment towards beings, and even towards itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics” (NIV205). ‘Ontology’ identifies what there is, what counts as ‘a being’, and these identifications are intellectually justified by an accompanying ‘theology’. The combination

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related line of criticism that Bernard Williams opens up regarding Nietzsche when he suggests that the latter’s “conception of social relations owes more to his understanding of the ancient world than a grasp of modernity”. Interestingly Williams qualifies this by saying that “the idea of nihilism is undeniably relevant to modern conditions”, but unfortunately does not explain why. *The Gay Science*, *op.cit.p.xii*.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature*, James Tartaglia, Routledge: London, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Iain Thomson, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Thomson, *op.cit.* p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> Here, and elsewhere, we do not distinguish between the views of the ‘early’ and ‘late’ Heidegger, on the assumption that the core of his later beliefs is prefigured in the *Nietzsche* volumes – this, in my view, is largely what makes those books so interesting.

(*Ontotheology*) thereby creates what Thomson calls “constellations of intelligibility”. He also points out that ontological holism presupposes two additional theses which lend further credence to Heidegger’s account of metaphysics: *ontological historicity* and *epochality*. The first holds that our elemental ideas about what there is, and hence our basic understanding of reality, change over time. While the second, recognizing the way in which ontotheology stabilizes these ideas and this understanding, “specifies that Western humanity’s changing sense of reality congeals into a series of relatively distinct and unified historical epochs”.<sup>39</sup>

Heidegger’s history of metaphysics provides a narrative in which Nietzsche’s attempt to ‘counter’ nihilism only conjures it up in a stronger and more virulent form. What matters most here, for Heidegger, is that Being has been neglected, with little prospect of life progressing in ways which will alter this.<sup>40</sup> The picture he paints – empirically, as it were, for he is now expecting us to take his discussion seriously on its surface and not as ‘window dressing’ or some rhetorical ploy, is one which the whole earth is dominated by the unrestrained willfulness of humans, and all beings, including themselves, are treated as technological resources that have no inherent meaning, but are ‘on standby’ (*Bestand*), readily available for projects motivated and guided only by the bleakest calculative notions of ‘optimization’, ‘efficiency’, ‘cost-effectiveness’, and the like. The great danger, *the danger (die Gefahr)*, in Heidegger’s eyes, is that the Nietzschean nihilistic ontotheology of our time will buck the age-old trend of gradually giving way to some other version, and become, instead, a permanent fixture. If that happens, and Heidegger often speaks to us as if it *already has*, then we will inhabit “a technologically homogenized world civilization”.<sup>41</sup> Contemplating this, Thomson draws a plausibly dire conclusion: “It is, in fact, not so difficult to imagine that, in our endless quest for self-optimization, we might go so far as to unintentionally reengineer our meaning-bestowing capacity for creative world-disclosure right out of our genetic make-up, thereby eliminating the very source of any

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<sup>39</sup> Thomson, *op.cit.* p.142. Thomson goes into some detail in explaining how this works out for a number of different epochs: pre-Socratic, Platonic, medieval, modern, and late-modern.

<sup>40</sup> We are now alluding to the late Heidegger, although, as already suggested, the rudiments of this picture are already there in the *Nietzsche* books.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted by Thomson. The original source is *Gesamtausgabe* Vol.11: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1910-1976, H. Heidegger (ed.), Klostermann: Germany, 1983, p.243.

meaningful future.”<sup>42</sup> Set against such prospects, James’ claim that meaning is both safe and sufficient within the frame again seems complacent.<sup>43</sup>

### Heideggerian common sense

*The kingdom of nihilism is powerful.*

Gilles Deleuze

This concluding section could well have been entitled “Heideggerian common sense and the fragility of social meaning”. For the view from our final vantage point, reveals that the meaning typically generated in the frame is not robust enough to withstand a form of nihilism that can be derived from a common sense interpretation of Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche. Here, Heidegger’s claim that Nietzsche identified the necessary fragmentation of meaning which characterizes our societies is accepted, but the explanation for this ‘necessity’ (which is *historical*) can be couched in plainer terms that need not refer to the neglect of Being or involve use of any of the terminology associated with metaphysics as Heidegger views it (“essence”, “destiny”, “intrinsic law”, “inner logic”, and so forth). What is missing – and its absence *constitutes* a cause of ‘fragmentation’, is the equivalent of a thoroughly naturalized metaphysics: a guiding conception of how life makes sense considered in the round. This needs to involve, or at least inspire, a set of interwoven beliefs and congruent practices that provide practical guidance as to how to make sense of life *as a whole*, and *within* the whole so that social purposes can be aligned with it. James contends that while “nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal ... we can still act as if it did” (172). But, generally speaking, we do not. When we do, any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware *philosophical* reflection is liable to destroy it. Common sense nihilism distilled from the late Heidegger’s diagnosis of our world shows: “There is no longer any goal in and

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<sup>42</sup> Thomson, *op.cit.* 157.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, Julian Young claims that Heidegger, in his later work, is the only significant ‘post-death-of-God’ philosopher who contends “there is a meaning to life as such”. This ‘meaning’ is revealed when the role of ‘guardianship of the world’ is fulfilled; *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Julian Young, Routledge: London, 2014, p.248. Again for reasons of space, we do not explore the possibility that this claim could be worked up into a sustained objection to James’ view that life is meaningless.

through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere, and in the direction of which they can develop” (NI157).<sup>44</sup> The absence of such goals is a symptom of an unsettling, Western world-historical, nihilistic social malaise, the evidence for which seems ubiquitous. A cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> In his introduction to NI, the translator David Krell points out that *in context* this remark also bears an ominous interpretation, one that implies the absence of such goals is “a matter of the *Volk*, a matter that calls for bold deeds and interminable struggle” (NI xiii).

<sup>45</sup> I have resisted throughout any play on Heidegger’s great fear of ‘enframing’ (*Gestell*) and James’ philosophical satisfaction with his own version of it and with the meaning that life in the frame achieves (plus the escape hatch of ‘transcendence’). The way out of nihilism that the later Heidegger advocates involves an approach to life that is the antithesis of ‘the will to power’. It involves an abdication of what he calls ‘calculative thinking’ and ‘willfulness’ in order to take up a meditative stance (*Gelassenheit*) in which things in the world are left to reveal their nature. This approach involves a version of truth (unconcealment) that possibly insulates it from the Davidsonian objections about meaning mentioned at the start of this paper.



## Reply to Alan Malachowski

James Tartaglia\*

Alan Malachowski went back to Nietzsche and Heidegger, and thereby the very heart of the issues pertaining to my stance on nihilism; because he did so, I could feel this reply rapidly gestate in response to practically every line I read. So let me get straight to the heart of the matter myself, by amending one of Malachowski's quotations from Heidegger:

Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is nihilism. (p. 103)

I would say:

Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is the scientific culture which insufficient and inadequate reflection upon nihilism has unfortunately contributed to.

I very much doubt that this culture is the result of an inevitable unfolding of historical forces. But nevertheless, that is where we have ended up. And although I remain deeply sceptical about the kind of 'redemptive agenda', as I called it in *Meaningless*, which pervades the works of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, nevertheless where we have ended up creates an obvious, practical problem for us all. People can live however they like, to the extent that they are able to, so long as the problem is fixed. Nihilism is not the problem, but rather part of the solution; so nihilism is not toothless. But nihilism is benign. We are not renting our meaning from it; we own the freehold.

Before I start to explain this combination of views, it should be emphasised that Malachowski could not have been expected to anticipate my reply; not from the resources of *Meaningless*, which is all he had to go on. In this respect, and others, his essay is a natural companion to the one by Tracy Llanera in this

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symposium. As I say in response to Llanera, I had an awful lot on my plate when writing *Meaningless*, making it practically inevitable that the future direction of travel for some of my positions would appear as mere hints; Malachowski and Llanera both honed in on blank spaces. In the sequel to *Meaningless*, entitled *Gods and Titans*, all should become clear. But since I am lucky enough to have such astute critics, I will use this forum to add enough additional material into the mix to hopefully explain to them why, when they look back at the text of *Meaningless* with hindsight, it is not so puzzling that I insisted on the ‘deep personal resonance’ of nihilism (Llanera); and that I never meant to suggest that ‘nihilism is ineffectual and can be profitably ignored’ (Malachowski, p. 115). As Malachowski points out, I could have said a lot more about nihilism than I did in my early chapters: my discussion of the framework would have benefited if I had related it to Searle’s work (p. 101), and I could have profitably discussed reflections on nihilism from recent European philosophy (p. 102). But I needed to press on to the metaphilosophy, and the accounts of consciousness, time and universals. Nihilism was the connecting theme of the book, not the subject; the format itself had a point, namely that the meaning of life is not just an isolated topic in philosophy. And if I had lingered to discuss the matters I will now enter into – which, in any case, I was not ready to do at the time – then I would have never reached my destination.

Near the beginning of his essay, Malachowski argues that,

obedience to a nihilistic external criterion, one that excludes or undermines social meaning should raise serious semantic concerns. The idea of such a criterion involves semantic incoherence: under the weight of an alien notion of exclusion, the language within which we talk about social meaning would begin to lose its sense. And, this would have a knock on effect. How can we then accept such a criterion, since the language in which it has to be expressed no longer makes sense to us? (p. 99)

He concludes this argument by saying that, ‘A totally meaningless life would, it appears, be one we could not contemplate, still less talk about’ (p. 100); where by a ‘totally meaningless life’, he means one in which nihilism holds true *and* there is no social meaning – the latter *because* nihilism holds true. It seems to me that the reason nihilism could not eradicate social meaning is rather simpler than that. For if reality is meaningless, then it does not have a meaning which could conflict with, and thereby cancel out, social meaning. Perhaps a meaning of life could, but

I have my doubts. It might explain to us, in some irrefutable fashion, that we are valuing all the wrong things. I think we could understand that alright. If we then proceeded to value the right things (those in accordance with the meaning of life), then social meaning would radically change, but not disappear. If we found we could not value the right things (because they were too esoteric for us to really care about, too disconnected from our lives, or too naturally repulsive to human beings, for instance), then the revelation we had just received might lead social meaning to collapse, I suppose; in which case we would not last long. But without the benefit of the revelation to go on, it seems to me considerably more likely that we would just carry on roughly as before; the phrase, ‘I shouldn’t really care about these things’, even if we believed it, would soon become hollow.

Malachowski’s main concern is captured in the following: ‘If nihilism has *no* teeth, if it is harmless, “morally neutral”, and “simply a fact”, with “no practical consequences” as James contends (e.g. [PML] 171&172), it is pretty uninteresting. For then, its domestication is cheap – more or less self-financing, while James’ key claims [nihilism is true; life continues as normal, since all we need for that is social meaning] appear to be trivial’ (p. 100). But the fact that nihilism has no potential to directly affect our daily routines – by persuading us to change our holiday plans, close our Facebook accounts, follow Tracy Emin’s lead by committing ‘emotional suicide’, find a guru, become at one with nature, leave your family to embark on a nomadic life, stop taking your family for granted, get rich quick, bend the rules, become involved in political anarchism, become more integrated with your local community, live ‘the good life’ of simplicity and self-sufficiency, put yourself first, put others first, put animals and the natural environment first – the fact that nihilism has no potential to rationally steer you in any of those directions, does not mean that it is *trivial*. For it is not *philosophically* trivial, which is one of the most crucial things my book was trying to show. It connects up squarely with a variety of traditional philosophical concerns. Reflection upon it allows us to become more self-conscious about philosophy. Reflection upon it resonates with our lives and draws us into philosophy. None of that is trivial, especially not in the midst of a scientific culture which is doing all it can to end such reflection.

Malachowski says that ‘a chimerical nihilism that is so easily de-fanged seems hardly worth much serious consideration’ (p. 100), and goes on to contrast it with the conceptions of nihilism to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger. But the nihilism I deal with is the only one there ever has been or ever will be in this

area of metaphysics; the contrast appears only because these thinkers and others built some of the consequences they saw arising from nihilism into the thesis itself. The consequences they saw made them think it needed to be 'de-fanged'. But realising that it never did does not make it less interesting; it makes it much more interesting and currently valuable. For it seems to me that these thinkers, for reasons that are perfectly understandable given the time in which they were thinking, alighted upon the wrong target. Nihilism arose just as religious influence declined and the scientifically-driven ability to produce life-changing technologies first reached maturity; ever since then, this ability has grown exponentially. All three of these events were integrally connected, of course, for when life got better, and man-made utopias started to seem within our reach, then the increasingly tenuous promise of an otherworldly utopia rapidly lost its relevance. Since religions embody a philosophy, philosophical influence fell into rapid decline and scientistic culture arose. Philosophers blamed nihilism. But it was scientistic culture and the decline of philosophy they should have worried about. Nihilism is as philosophical as you can get, and offers just the kind of credible secular position needed to keep thoughts about the meaning of life alive. So Nietzsche and Heidegger chose the wrong target, and painted it with the same dark colours that had been allocated to it by the religious philosophy which they should have been replacing.

Malachowski says that Nietzsche's predictions of an impending disaster which nihilism would precipitate, were incidental to his main insight; and that Heidegger is 'as firm as he is clear about this' (p. 105). I am happy to accept this. I wanted to emphasise the point that faltering assurance in metaphysically firm foundations underpinning our social and moral institutions has not led to chaos. Nietzsche thought it would, and that superhuman acts of will would be required on behalf of a newly emerging, better class of people, in order to keep a normal framework of life running in full knowledge that there are no such foundations. I think that is the standard worry; no foundations, no values, chaos. I also think Nietzsche was evidently wrong about this. Billions of people have since lived perfectly ordinary lives without believing in such foundations, and if the power of such belief continues to decline, it will be in the manner we have already witnessed, namely through readings of ancient religious texts becoming gradually more liberal, such that they fit better with current conditions of life. In this sense, then, nihilism has not remotely had the practical consequences it was feared it would have; and I think this was a point well worth making. In fact, I do not think

nihilism has had very much effect at all, outside of art and certain kinds of philosophy, because philosophy was also so much in decline in the twentieth century that nobody much thought about it. To the extent that people continued to think about the meaning of life, they assumed that their lives *were* meaningful, even when they no longer believed in the metaphysical foundations required for there to be a meaning of life; intellectual epicycles like the social meaning debate are attempts to make some sense of this.

It seems to me that there is nothing superhuman about the ability to carry on ordinary life without belief in metaphysical foundations. All you need in order for ordinary purposes to govern your behaviour is a compelling social framework; of the kind we have always had. Will, if you like, is all that has ever kept that going; although why it would have to be will *to power*, I have no idea, despite the fact that power is obviously one of the big motivators. So when Malachowski explains Nietzsche's proposal by saying that, 'The value of values then lies *in the willing* itself, and not in anything outside the domain of the will that is doomed to self-destruction or can be undermined' (p. 112), my natural reaction is: that is how it has always been. Now obviously the 'will' in question has received – and still does receive – support from *beliefs* about metaphysical foundations; although how frequently and how explicitly are questionable matters. But we evidently do not need this support; this may not have been obvious in Nietzsche's time, but it is now. I see the *Übermensch* every time I visit the supermarket. The fact that this kind of worry has been taken so seriously is the reason that I emphasised the lack of practical consequences of nihilism, and why I focused on Nietzsche's predictions when discussing him. If you want to rehabilitate nihilism, as I do, then this is important.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche was indeed driving at a metaphysically deeper point. This is clear from the fact that he says nihilism will lead the notion of truth itself to collapse; which strikes me as hyperbolic, radically unsupported in Nietzsche, and badly supported thereafter – despite the influence the idea has had on more radical forms of twentieth-century philosophy. I think a large part of the appeal of the idea, as I say in Chapter 2, was to distance us further from nihilism: since if nothing is true, nihilism could not be either. In any case, Heidegger makes Nietzsche's deeper point quite explicit, in a sentence Malachowski quotes, when he says that 'Nietzsche uses the names "God" and "Christian God" to indicate the *supersensory world in general ... the metaphysical world*' (p. 105). That seems to me largely right; the concern about the collapse of Christian philosophy was part

of a wider concern about the collapse of metaphysics. And if we connect this with the Heidegger quote I opened with, namely ‘Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is nihilism’, then we start to get into a position where we can see both what is right and wrong with Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Nietzsche was right, in a sense, that we only need will to keep the framework going; but the active connotations of ‘will’ are misleading in this regard. Since will is backed by desire, and our will to achieve some purpose or another is presupposed in framework engagement, this is not the heroic feat he imagined. He was also right, in a sense, that nihilism would sweep away the philosophical beliefs maintained by religious institutions (it was a factor), and that a void of philosophy from our world would result. However, there was no historical necessity to such a void appearing. Philosophy might have seamlessly transitioned, and if technological advance had not so dramatically changed gear at exactly the same time as the idea of nihilism was starting to be taken seriously, then such a transition is not excessively hard to imagine. Suppose a benevolent alien race had visited us while our scientific and technological abilities remained primitive, and bestowed upon us the means to make our lives considerably longer, easier and more pleasant; essentially, they gave us modern life, but without the means to understand, and thereby reproduce, that which makes it possible. Suppose also, if you like, that they banned us from trying to scientifically advance. In such a situation, the influence of religious institutions might have collapsed and nihilism might have arisen; but it is far from obvious that a void of philosophy would thereby have ensued.

But the void happened and it is dangerous; so in an important sense Nietzsche was right. He was also part of the problem, however, because he thought that nihilism and the nullification of the philosophical tradition were inextricable. This is one major reason why he welcomed nihilism; as a destructive, but ultimately cleansing force. There are strong elements of both anti-philosophy and scientism in Nietzsche. He wanted to be the prophet of a new age which would abandon the philosophical tradition he so vehemently criticised throughout his career, in favour of beliefs such as eternal recurrence, which he considered thoroughly scientific.

For Heidegger, as Malachowski says, ‘the human situation looks worse than Nietzsche envisaged: nihilism has engulfed our lives, draining them of not just meaning, but also the resources for escaping from, or overcoming, the value vacuum’ (p. 107). But nihilism has not drained our lives of social meaning, which

is the only meaning they ever had; and the only relevant ‘value vacuum’ is a philosophy vacuum, primarily caused by technology and the scientism it inspired, and which proper attention to nihilism might have mitigated; and still can. As Malachowski goes on to say, ‘Nietzsche’s great, and terrible, discovery, Heidegger tells us, is that the metaphysics which has been driving history since the time of Plato is unremittingly self-destructive. For the *values* it gave birth to, are fated to issue challenges to the legitimacy of both themselves and any would-be replacements. These are challenges that cannot be met’ (p. 108). He subsequently explains Heidegger’s charge that Nietzsche made three fundamental errors which led him to think the challenges could indeed be met, if only we could re-value the world with a hitherto unknown strength of will (pp. 113-4). The first is that although Nietzsche thought he was leaving metaphysics behind, his solution is itself metaphysical, and hence part of the problem. The second is that Nietzsche’s ‘unconditional subjectivity’ of willing, which needs no help from metaphysical foundations, leads to everything being interpreted as an object designed to satisfy our wills; as Heidegger puts it, ‘earth can show itself now only as the attack arranged in the willing of man ... nature appears everywhere as the object of technology’ (p. 113). And thirdly, that Being is no longer accepted as what it is; we actively force it into our own subjective mould, rather than listen to what it tells us about itself.

Within the Heideggarian landscape, these three criticisms of Nietzsche are all practically the same. Essentially, he thinks that the history of metaphysics is the history of actively objectifying our reality through subjective acts of will, technology is the inevitable result of this tendency, whereby we have learnt to mould the reality we have objectified to suit our own subjective purposes, and Nietzsche’s solution of trying to will the value back is not a solution at all, but rather the culmination of the metaphysical tradition. We were landed with the problem by all of that objectifying willing, and Nietzsche planned to solve it with more of the same. I am put in mind of a discussion I had fairly recently with a philosopher (I shall not name names) who was arguing that motivational enhancement drugs are a good thing. Using them can help athletes to train harder, to give the example he lingered over; if sprinters took enough of them, perhaps they could run 100 metres in 9 seconds, rather than just 9.5 seconds, for instance (the more specific example is mine). I suggested that boredom can be a good thing, since it can lead us to re-evaluate our commitments, and thereby sometimes radically improve our lives; but these drugs could leave us locked into our initial

decisions. He took my point and suggested a solution: we make de-motivational drugs too. This struck me as a clear case of trying to fix a problem (one which we do not remotely need to have, but no doubt soon will) with the cause of the problem; and I think this is exactly how Nietzsche's solution struck Heidegger.

I agree with Heidegger about a lot of this; wholeheartedly, in fact. I do think we have ended up with a scientific culture which increasingly sees nothing to the world except what can be done with it. And taken in a certain way, I also agree with his criticism of Nietzsche. If the problem Nietzsche was addressing was how to maintain, without metaphysical support, the everyday values that allow us to live together, then I do not think there is any problem; I can accept his view that our values are held up by will, but only with the crucial caveat that our wilful commitment to projects is predominately a matter of going along with the imperatives of the framework, which comes naturally to us, and hence is no Herculean task. But if the problem is the relentless rise of life-changing technologies within the philosophical void of scientism, which I think is what really worried Heidegger, then Nietzsche's proposal is a clear case of trying to fix a problem with more of the same. A concrete example of this Nietzschean approach is to be found in the proposal to 'morally enhance' us all, so that we can safely manage the technologies blindly thrust upon us with ever-increasing frequency; often in the name of legitimate scientific curiosity, but financed by political agendas and market forces.

Unfortunately, however, Heidegger identifies the root of the problem as metaphysics, which is as clear a case as there could be of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. One particular strain of metaphysics, physicalism, has contributed to the problem, for sure; it gave scientism a philosophy to cling onto during the transition it envisages to no philosophy at all. But metaphysics itself is not the problem; it is the core of our philosophical heritage which might still allow us to break the back of scientific culture, and start thinking about technology within the wider context of what we are, what we want, and what we ought to want. This may yet allow us to exercise some rational control over the ability we have acquired to rapidly harness more and more powers for ourselves through the medium of objective thought.

Our current predicament with technology was not inevitable from the moment people started thinking about the world metaphysically; or at least if it was, then I do not see how anyone could possibly know this. Heidegger says that 'metaphysics is nihilism' (p. 114) – which does not make an awful lot of sense –



but given that he attributes our predicament with technology to nihilism, and buys into Nietzsche's story about nihilism being built into metaphysics from the outset, we can certainly see why he thought it was inevitable from the outset. The only plausibility to this idea, however, comes from the sound Nietzschean observation that the epistemology of metaphysical views which place the foundations of our values in another world is so ropery that it is unsurprising that people ultimately gave up on their belief in a meaning of life and discovered nihilism. But it in no way follows that Plato's transcendent metaphysics was itself nihilistic. It was a strong rejection of nihilism, which took considerable unpicking before we could see the truth it covered over. If you whitewash a blue wall, and it eventually flakes off, the whitewash was not blue. You would only think this if you thought Plato persuaded us that the meaning of life could only be found in a transcendent context, when in actual fact it is really to be found in ordinary life; thus we forgot about the real meaning of life, invested our hopes for one in the transcendent context, and when those hopes did not pan out, we were landed with nihilism. I think that is basically what Nietzsche and Heidegger did think, but it is all wrong; it incorporates both a sophisticated conflation with social meaning and a hidden strain of anti-philosophy; or in Heidegger's case, anti-everybody-else's-philosophy. Plato was right that the meaning of life could only be found within a transcendent context, because without one, there is no way of explaining why we are here. His thought was not nihilistic: it was philosophical. It addressed a philosophical question, and nihilism addresses that same question.

In this light, a highly conspicuous feature of my book needs to be considered; one which Malachowski passes over. The book combines nihilism with transcendence. (For some years I planned to call it *Nihilism and Transcendence* – but nobody would have read a book with that title.) Consider the following:

James' swift suggestion that we can show how ineffectual nihilism is by simply severing the connection between meaning and religion (for this will leave meaning unscathed) fails to acknowledge that such a move cannot thwart Nietzsche's 'richer nihilism', which depends not on tight links between meaning and religion, but between meaning and 'the transcendent in general'. (p. 110)

However the link between nihilism and a denial of 'the transcendent in general' is exactly what I set out to break. Nihilism is trivially incompatible with belief in

a transcendent context *of meaning*, but it does not remotely follow that it is incompatible with *any* transcendent context. The assumption that once you abandon a transcendent context of meaning, you must thereby jettison the whole concept of transcendence, promotes philosophy-scepticism, scientism and the philosophical void. I argue, however, that the history of philosophy has provided us with a number of routes through which we can come to see that reality is indeed transcendent. Desire for a meaning of life may have initially inspired interest in transcendence, but philosophy thereafter found many rational routes to the same place.

As regards nihilism, far from me being someone who, ‘unaware of its metaphysical depth, believes it to be patently inoffensive’ (p. 106), I set out to explain its metaphysical depth. I believe it to be ‘patently inoffensive’ because explaining that depth required severing the link between nihilism as a rejection of a transcendent context of meaning – which in a religious context is offensive – and the spurious idea that nihilism requires the rejection of transcendence *per se*. I placed nihilism within the context of philosophical reflection upon the transcendence of reality.

Malachowski says that,

Nihilism begins to bite when a metaphysics that caters for ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’ has no operational existence within culture. Life in the frame is always lacking in that regard. For, it is invariably dominated by the antics of the ‘herd’ (Nietzsche) or the ‘They’ (Heidegger), the *mobile vulgus*, the people who are manipulated by popular culture, banal politics, and prejudices masquerading as opinions – and it is therefore bound to forfeit stability. (pp. 110-1)

He is explaining Nietzsche and Heidegger’s perspective, which is infected with snobbery. Just because they did not like to see us prosper and inevitably become rather more conspicuous, it does not remotely follow that our framework could not be infused with considerably more philosophy than at present, or that if it became so infused, our lives would substantively change. They might have wanted our lives to substantively change, such that the masses went back to the ‘old ways’ in which they knew their place, but that is entirely tangential to the real problem they failed to isolate. The real problem is that when philosophy culturally collapsed, technology was left unconstrained by philosophical reflection. Few of

us can have any real effect on this problem, and the only extent to which it reflects on culture as a whole is that if philosophy were to acquire renewed cultural respect – such that anti-philosophy collapsed and awareness of, and interest in, philosophical ideas grew to at least the current level of awareness of, and interest in, scientific ideas – then the few who *could* have a real effect would act very differently to how they do at present, I think. This would not be a radical cultural upheaval; who apart from religious fundamentalists, political radicals, or cultural snobs wants that? I am not aware of even professional philosophers living in radically different ways to the contemporary norm. Some are a little odd; but when they sit at their desks to write, I cannot see that this makes an awful lot of difference – unless they are writing about ethics, perhaps, in which case it does not strike me as an obvious advantage.

Malachowski goes on to quote Nietzsche:

The real disadvantage that the cessation of metaphysical views brings with it lies in the fact that the individual keeps his eye too strictly upon his short lifespan and receives no stronger impulses to build durable institutions designed to last for centuries; he wants to pick the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and he therefore no longer cares to plant those trees that require centuries of constant cultivation and are intended to shade a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence still *contrasts* too strongly with the deeply breathing repose of metaphysical ages. (p. 111)

He is right to the extent that this is the attitude taken to the development of new technologies. An advantage can be achieved, or a long-standing human dream realised, or a current problem solved; so we race to produce the technology as quickly as possible (with personal rewards for the scientists involved if they get there first, of course), despite the fact that the new ability we will acquire will never go away, and may well change our lives forever. So in light of what Nietzsche says above, why on earth would he target *metaphysics*? Because, as becomes clear in the bit Malachowski misses out ('a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence'), Nietzsche wants to replace metaphysics with science. But this scientistic agenda, and the success it has achieved, is the source of the problem. Nietzsche does go on to consider the possibility that philosophy might be useful for smoothing over this transition to pure science; but ultimately decides that, 'It is preferable to use *art* for this transition' (Nietzsche

1878: 32). For the job requires catering to our feelings, which philosophy can only appease (with false metaphysics) or eliminate (with science); elimination is what is ultimately required, but since this is too harsh for now, art's relative isolation from the scientific truth makes it ideal. Nietzsche's antipathy to the metaphysical thought of nihilism flowed straight from his scientism.

Heidegger also targeted metaphysics. This is because he thought that metaphysics was nihilistic, and hence the problem. He did not always say 'metaphysics', either; in *Meaningless* I quoted him saying, 'the development of philosophy into the independent sciences ... is the legitimate completion of philosophy' (PML, p. 67). That is why he despaired of any prospect for a return of metaphysics / philosophy of the old kind, which had ordered our lives through the medium of religion: he thought it had run its course. But the objectifying metaphysics which he critiqued in *Being and Time* is only one strain of the discipline. Put aside the terminology he adopted to suit his own agenda – and his self-image as the unique 'thinker of Being' – and it is clear that Heidegger was doing metaphysics too; he was certainly not doing science. Metaphysics – of Heidegger's kind, and innumerable others – remains perfectly viable. And it is the only route to undermining scientism, since scientism is forced to embrace its own metaphysic: physicalism. That makes it vulnerable. Nihilism is a metaphysical position with the power to draw us back into this area and see things such as this. Given Heidegger's concerns about us 'peoples of the earth who have been drawn in to modernity's arena of power' (p. 106), then, his choice of target was extremely poor.

Malachowski says that,

James' position seems to be that metaphysics *cannot* ground intelligibility on the grand scale Heidegger believes metaphysics aims for, but this is of little consequence because meaning within specific social contexts does not require such grounding. Metaphysics cannot underwrite the meaning of the world *as a whole* or, in Heidegger's terms, "of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety". It cannot do this because 'the whole' or 'the fundamental structure' has no meaning. Meaning is, so to speak, local, and floats free of concerns about globalized 'grounding'. Being then drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss. (p. 115)

Well, yes and no. There is no meaning of life, so metaphysics cannot ‘ground intelligibility’ in that sense. But we can aim to produce metaphysically complete descriptions of reality; and that is a way of grounding intelligibility. Just because we cannot do it one way, it does not mean we cannot do it another. We can of course theorise about ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’; as I did at length in my book. Why should that structure need to be supported by a meaning of life? It is not Being that ‘drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss’, only overall meaning. Being is transcendent, in my view, and we make sense of it with the framework, objective thought, and metaphysical reflection; the task I undertook was to line these up coherently in such a way as to shed light on matters of natural philosophical interest. As with all metaphysics, the aim was to place our lives in a wider, illuminating perspective; the widest possible, at times. Heidegger thought Nietzsche’s metaphysics was ‘deadly in an extreme sense because it does not permit Being itself to come into the dawning’ (p. 114). The only remedy for that is better metaphysics.

Now I was hoping Malachowski would bring up Rorty at some point in his paper, and he did not disappoint. As he says (p. 115), Rorty thought it was crazy of Heidegger to think that current socio-political problems are a direct product of the history of metaphysics. Malachowski disagrees, on the grounds that this history has produced our general conception of reality; it has made things intelligible to us in a manner which is now causing socio-political problems. I would qualify this. One strain of metaphysics has contributed to this problem, physicalism, which Francis Bacon launched an influential manifesto for on the back of the scientific revolution, and which later came into its own when technology had come into its own. As such, I also disagree with Rorty, although not as strongly as with the further implication of what he says, namely that metaphysics will have no part in the solution. Rorty had a point: the rise of technology was far more influential in promoting scientistic culture than physicalist philosophy. But *contra* Rorty, however, metaphysics will have a crucial part to play in the solution, because so long as scientism goes unchecked – and only metaphysics can intellectually check it – then the inevitability of our discovering more and more objective truths about the world, and thereby acquiring more and more technological power for ourselves, will simply not be questioned. The only questioning involved, as is the case in our present situation, will concern how best to deal with the consequences of whatever we have just discovered, or expect to discover soon; when those consequences become clear,

that is, and to the extent that they can be anticipated before the irreversible event. Rorty's promotion of physicalism, and his paradoxical combination of anti-philosophy and pragmatism ('all philosophy is confused' / 'let's put it to useful purposes'), was not helpful in this regard. He had a habit, it seems to me, of homing in on all the important and interesting issues, making them as clear as day, but then too often saying the wrong things about them.

I shall end by quoting the ending of Malachowski's essay, because I agree with much of it, when construed in the right way, and yet strongly disagree with one word:

What is missing – and its absence *constitutes* a cause of 'fragmentation', is the equivalent of a thoroughly naturalized metaphysics: a guiding conception of how life makes sense considered in the round. This needs to involve, or at least inspire, a set of interwoven beliefs and congruent practices that provide practical guidance as to how to make sense of life *as a whole*, and *within* the whole so that social purposes can be aligned with it. James contends that while "nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal ... we can still act as if it did" (172). But, generally speaking, we do not. When we do, any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware *philosophical* reflection is liable to destroy it. Common sense nihilism distilled from the late Heidegger's diagnosis of our world shows: "There is no longer any goal in and through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere, and in the direction of which they can develop" [Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, p. 157]. The absence of such goals is a symptom of an unsettling, Western world-historical, nihilistic social malaise, the evidence for which seems ubiquitous. A cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking. (pp. 118-9)

The word, as the reader will no doubt have guessed, is 'naturalized'. Naturalized metaphysics, namely physicalism, is exactly what we do not need. We need metaphysics; and we need the idea of a naturalized metaphysics to become a distant and thoroughly discredited memory, born of an age in which amazement at our suddenly spectacular achievements in science led us to forget about philosophy, and assume that if there could still be such a thing, it would have to

emulate science. Of course, metaphysics must take account of what science tells us about the world – when it is relevant – and it must never conflict with it; we should not make that kind of mistake again. But the scientific description of reality is not the widest perspective we can take. And without wider perspectives, science becomes dangerously autonomous.

Malachowski says that generally speaking, we do not act as if life has an overall goal, and that ‘any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware philosophical reflection is liable to destroy it’. I disagree. While writing this paper, my goals have been presupposed as I effortlessly engaged with the task at hand (the engagement, not the task, was effortless). I imagine it was the same for Malachowski when writing his paper. I think we both showed a ‘modicum of historically aware philosophical reflection’, but neither of us gave up. That is all I ever meant. I think he means that humanity as a whole needs to act as if it had an overall goal. I do not think this has ever happened before; but maybe one day, and maybe it would be good. Nevertheless, I do not think it necessary, because I do not think there is any problem of widespread ‘nihilistic social malaise’; I think the only worry in this area which remains of contemporary relevance relates squarely and exclusively to a particular problem with technology, which arose due to the badly-timed decline of philosophy’s cultural influence.

Malachowski says that, ‘a cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking.’ But we do not need an ersatz metaphysics, we need the real thing. And although there is not enough philosophy in our current framework to deal with the problem, this situation could be rapidly turned around. The problem is big alright, but it is not a wholesale problem with contemporary life; malcontents have continually been detecting such wholesale problems with the culture of their era ever since Ancient Greece. Assuming we will not succumb to misanthropy, then, they cannot all have been right. I do not think that this is where the problem lies; many problems do, of course, but not the one at issue. The problem is that our scientific knowledge now far exceeds our philosophical wisdom; and the philosophical wisdom we do have has been maligned and quarantined. So we have too much power and not enough control. The balance needs to be redressed and I maintain that reflection on nihilism and transcendence can help.

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## In Search of Perspective

### Notes on Freedom, Transcendence, and Finitude in Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*

Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg\*

#### Abstract

This paper suggests that a main concern of James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* is human freedom, and the ways in which it may be served (and hampered) by philosophy. Initial remarks about freedom and nihilism are followed (in Section II) by brief methodological considerations. Section III offers a reading of the idea of transcendence as Tartaglia deploys it, while Section IV makes use of a comparison with Richard Rorty's understanding of the relation between philosophy and freedom in order to locate what is distinctive about Tartaglia's approach. Finally, in Section V, it is suggested that freedom, in Tartaglia's system of nihilism, is essentially a feature of finitude.

But she had known from the moment I appeared, and now, risking tensions with her workmates, and fines, she was explaining to me that I had won nothing, that in the world there is nothing to win, that her life was full of varied and foolish adventures as much as mine, and that time simply slipped away without any meaning, and it was good just to see each other every so often to hear the mad sound of the brain of one echo in the mad sound of the brain of the other.

Elena Greco<sup>1</sup>

**I. It cannot be helped;** human beings are free. We enjoy freedom of action in the moment, and we enjoy deliberative freedom—freedom in deciding whether to pursue this goal or that end. Moreover, we enjoy that peculiar freedom, of central importance to James Tartaglia in his challenging, inspiring, and courageous monograph,<sup>2</sup> to stand back from our life altogether, to disengage from it and to

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* (New York: Europa Editions), 2013, Ch. 124. (Kindle edition)

<sup>2</sup> Tartaglia, James, 2016. *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*. London: Bloomsbury. Henceforth cited as *Meaningless*. All bare page-references are to this

contemplate it—to question the value, the significance, of all the projects and plans and habits that make it up, and ask; are they worthwhile? Do I want to be doing the things I am doing, living the life I am living? Is this life of mine of value? We enjoy this peculiar, encompassing reflective freedom as—I am sure Tartaglia is right about this (cf., 24) —a consequence of those more constrained, more narrowly targeted exercises of choice the capacity for which have been bestowed on us by evolution, indeed, by the very same evolutionary processes that produced consciousness. For I think we can take it that freedom and consciousness go together. Not analytically, perhaps; but for embodied, temporal, self-moving organisms like us, they are inseparable. To be conscious of our surroundings is to be aware of the possibilities they afford us. Even if, in the limiting case, they should afford us none, the salience that fact would then have in our awareness serves to confirm the connection of awareness to freedom of action. And to be conscious of our life as such is to be aware of the contingency of its particular features and engagements; not just of the fact that they might have been other than what they are, but, importantly, of the fact that our attitude to them, our engagement, might have been—and indeed might at any moment come to be—different from what it is. So: No freedom without subjectivity. Let that be a first slogan.

Now, it may look as if, by describing our reflective freedom as an ability to disengage from life's projects and question their significance, I am about to take these preliminary remarks on freedom in a direction that would violate right at the outset a critical distinction that Tartaglia is at pains to make. This is the distinction between the value of my life and yours, of the various life-contents that make up those lives, on the one hand, and, on the other, the question of the meaning of life as such. Because Tartaglia, in *Meaningless*, is *not* concerned to argue that *disengagement from the framework*, as he calls what I have labelled the exercise of reflective freedom, will reveal that your life and mine has no value.<sup>3</sup> Quite to the contrary; Tartaglia emphatically makes the point that however we answer the complicated questions we raise in assessing the value of the life we each happen to live, there is no traction to be had by contemplating the meaning of life as such—for, as he says, life, as such, simply has none. This follows from the basic

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book.

<sup>3</sup> I will continue to call this standing-back-from-life *reflective freedom*, while recognizing a point that Tartaglia stresses, namely that most of our reflection is actually instrumental and engaged in character. Reflection of this commonplace sort directed to alternative means, ends, plans, and priorities I will call the exercise of *deliberative freedom*.

claim of nihilism: reality is meaningless. Reality is meaningless, and so is life, as a part of that reality. Note well, however, says Tartaglia, that that is not at all to deny that any particular existence can be meaningful in all sorts of ways—it typically will be, in so far as it is enmeshed in a web of purposes and intentions. So, for instance, all manner of desires, values and purposes may be at stake when a child is brought into the world. And whether or not I was begotten with the aim of securing an heir or a donor or a well-rounded family, or all or none of these, may matter significantly for the web of meanings that constitute the context of my life—that great latticework of meaning into which I find myself *geworfen*—but all this is neither here nor there when it comes to the question of whether there is a meaning to life as such.

Actually, there is a double disconnect here. Individual human beings may, like tables, chairs, chickens and banana flies, be brought into existence in a deliberate, purposive manner with an eye to certain specific ends that this existence should serve, but unlike artefacts, farm animals, and laboratory organisms, human beings, once up and running, may come to stand at a reflective distance to such initiating purposes, and may or may not come to think of them as sources of significance for their life. That much is so obvious to most modern human beings that it seems hardly worth noting. The further disconnect, though, the one at issue in the context of *Meaningless*, is that however we as individuals comport ourselves with respect to sources of value, we must recognize that there is no general purpose for us as human beings to serve. We are not here *for* anything, for any reason, at all—notwithstanding the multifarious purposes that may be fuelling the coming into existence of concrete individuals or motivating each in the pursuit of the projects, pleasures, ends and plans that make up the particular action horizon of a particular life. It just happened that homo sapiens evolved and eventually—or perhaps rather quickly, in evolutionary terms—became the sole surviving species of the genus *homo*. Thus, whatever meaning I may find in the life-stuff that makes up my particular life, this cannot be due to a relation between the purposes that may have been involved in my conception, nor the goals and values that I commit to and navigate by, and the very point of life itself, since life in itself has no point. So, if my goals really are worthwhile goals, and my values really valuable, this must have some explanation other than my species membership. If my life is in some way meaningful, this cannot be due to the meaning of life. In slogan form: Homo has no purpose.

This seems to me to be a correct diagnosis. Reality *is* meaningless.

Accordingly, life, as such, has no meaning. I suppose this is common ground for a lot of people. There is nothing very startling, so far, philosophically. Where things may begin to get interesting, is in the assessment of the significance of what we may call bare philosophical nihilism. What is the importance of the nihilist observation—of this fact, to use Tartaglia’s idiom—for life, and for philosophy? The standard direction from here, for those who take philosophical nihilism as common ground and not a *reductio ad absurdum*, has been to ask; how then are we to account for the meaning that human lives may indeed have? What is it? How does one get it? Tartaglia has a fair bit to say about such efforts, and, in general about the presupposition that the meaninglessness of life is a *problem* (surmountable or not) for the meanings of lives. However, one very refreshing aspect of Tartaglia’s *Meaningless* is that he thinks of this entire discussion—which is to say most philosophical examinations of nihilism so far—as a philosophical dead-end. We must all make sense of our lives as we can, narrate them as we go to suit our various needs and ends. Let this be granted. Tartaglia has a grab-bag for all that stuff—*social meaning*—and once something has been tossed into that bag it is not likely to make any further appearance in *Meaningless*. His treatment of that issue is a mere prolegomenon; a diagnosis of a mistaken assumption and its consequences. Tartaglia’s positive concern is to show us what philosophy looks like once we take bare philosophical nihilism to be its main discovery, the answer to its central question. What must a discipline be like that is devoted to a question to which bare philosophical nihilism is the answer? That is the question *Meaningless* addresses. And the answer is that such a discipline would be an autonomous and potentially progressive endeavour, quite distinct from scientific inquiry into the objective world. Moreover, it would be rather a robust discipline, one that has a special—even central—significance for inquiring minds, and thus would tend to spring up in one recognizable form or other no matter what the conditions of thought or the particular cultural context of human existence might be—beyond, perhaps, conditions of bare subsistence. And it would be, finally, an endeavour with a kind of unity in all its diversity that is much stronger than whatever continuity might be wrung from a historical narrative of influence and textual interconnection. It is substantive.

This is an assertive stance on behalf of philosophy, and a very attractive one, not least because it is assumed in full awareness of all the reasons that have been amassed for philosophy scepticism over the course of the most recent centuries (cf., 74-78). In what follows quite soon below, I would like to consider this

particular feat a little further. Specifically, I want to try to get clearer on the innovative move that makes this stance possible; the separation of the question of the meaning of life and the possibility of transcendence. Then there are two further aspects of *Meaningless* I should like to touch on. I would like, first, to venture the hypothesis that a deep concern of *Meaningless* is with human freedom, in particular that a significant feature of the nihilist hypothesis, in Tartaglia's hands, is that it serves human freedom in a particularly philosophical way. In aid of this exegetical-hermeneutical endeavour, I will bring in some themes from Richard Rorty, who, as I take him, is committed above all to the idea of philosophy as an engagement for human freedom. These themes will then lead us to my final topic—finitude. Here, in the brief concluding section, I will be reaching back to transcendence, once again, and simply wonder whether finitude and transcendence are a package deal, so that emphasizing one may be a way to illuminate the other. If Tartaglia were to agree, that, yes, indeed, expanding in this general direction on finitude may be one way of approaching the point that the transcendence hypothesis makes, then that would be an encouragement. If not, I will learn something from the explanation.

**II. A brief interjection on philosophical aim and method** may, however, be useful at this point, before further talk of transcendence, if only to ensure that expectations are appropriately tweaked. Tartaglia is (in *Meaningless* at least) a systematic philosopher. He marks his ground, sets up his claim, and then drives the transcendent hypothesis through three central problems of metaphysics (consciousness, time, universals). Thereby, he both recasts these problems and also constructs a multifaceted argument for their interconnection as concerns that spring naturally from a philosophical engagement (*pro et con*) with the transcendent hypothesis, an intellectual product—a deliverable, we might say, in the parlance of current grant application lingo—which, in turn, receives substantiation and clarification in the process of the systematic elaboration and development of the three metaphysical themes. Now, a natural form of response to this sort of systematic philosophy is dissection; extracting the arguments on offer, locally and globally, assessing them for soundness, seeking out qualification and amendment as necessary, or even providing, perhaps, the occasional refutation (if, unlike Nietzsche, one has something to do with refutation). From my point of view, there are two difficulties with this approach. The first is a matter of personal limitation; argumentative analysis is something I do at most tolerably

well and then only in cases where I am not particularly taken with the process of thought under scrutiny, something which, given the constraints we generally operate under, seems a misplaced use of intellectual effort. The second reason—quite likely a rationalization of the first seeking to make virtue of necessity—is this: good systematic thought produces synergy; the whole is more than the sum of the parts, there is systemic enrichment. My interest in systematic philosophy is in this enrichment—less in how it is achieved, more in what it illuminates. Dissection and disassembly threaten to drive away exactly what it is I want to get a hold of. So it is incumbent on me to address interesting systematic philosophy in a different, non-dissecting way. I think of it as a form of active reception, or listening. Listening is not a contribution to systematic thinking, but for us non-systematic philosophers it is a way, possibly, of getting something out of systematic philosophy, by ferreting out instances of it that seem fuelled by the right sorts of sensibilities, and then trying carefully to speak along with it, alongside it, and then seeing how it responds.

But, it is entirely fair to ask, what might such metaphors really come to? What might “listening” mean here that could not be just as fairly put by saying “trying to understand,” “seeking to interpret” or even “offering an analysis of”?

Well, let’s see. “Please listen to me!” I might occasionally find myself saying (or wishing). What might I thereby be asking for? “Please,” I would probably be intending, “try to be guided, as you construe me, by what is my central concern. And please don’t impose on my words your semantic ready-mades, your fast-thoughts, your blocking responses. Wait, please—hold your inferences. Don’t be modus-tollensing me. Give me space to find my descriptive way. Give me some conceptual latitude. Yield a little—be generous, be flexible. Walk along with me for a bit, and let me language-lead, as I try to find a new way.” Of course, systematic philosophers rarely plead. But even so, one has the option of trying to listen, and of allowing oneself to be moved.

Slightly more philosophically, we might say that listening is a hermeneutic notion, embodying the idea central to the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer, that trying to understand is to stand prepared to be told something new (cf., Gadamer, 271).<sup>4</sup> And this, in turn, is to be guided by what Gadamer calls “the fore-conception of completeness” (Gadamer, 294). That means, as I read Gadamer, to be willing to undergo a change through an intellectual experience of encountering

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1991. *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, New York: Continuum.

new truths, of seeing what is the case in a new light. Now, *experience* is a central hermeneutical notion. The main point is that it always essentially involves a negative element. In genuine experience, some part of you is risked and lost, and that very process is enriching; you come to see the limitedness of a horizon that was yours. That is why it makes sense to think of experience as something that requires a certain openness. One need not be open to experience, of course—one can simply have things happen to one, and refuse to allow one's horizon of understanding to be challenged by them. In slogan form: Nothing ventured, nothing lost—nothing lost, nothing (re)generated. Listening, then, is the effort to be ready to be changed and enriched by venturing something in the encounter with an intellectual presentation. Its contrastive force derives from the kind of philosophical polemic that is a struggle for conceptual turf—for the right to decide the terms in which an issue is put and an investigation is framed. Listening aims not at a psychological understanding, but is rather an effort to comport oneself in a dialogue such that one's perspective may be changed through another's presentation of a common concern. That, more or less, is my agenda here, and with this in mind, I turn to the transcendent hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

**III. Transcendence** is the central concept of *Meaningless*, and to make a case for “the transcendent hypothesis” is its explicit aim. What does this hypothesis amount to?

This is the transcendent hypothesis—that the objective, physical world is transcended—and it provides the basis for a metaphysical description of the

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<sup>5</sup> Gadamer elaborates by way of a discussion of Heidegger's “disclosure of the forestructure of the understanding” (Gadamer, 268):

The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones.” [Gadamer, 269]

What is risked are the very expectations by which we are able to perceive something as meaningful at all. In one sense, this goes on in all linguistic interaction, as we accommodate mutually to secure fluency of communication. Listening is simply being deliberate about it, and halting, as best one can, the process of solidification of one's anticipatory prejudices of truth and meaning. Put crudely; instead of determining meaning and then assessing for validity, it is a matter of assuming validity and then determining for meaning. And, not least, of allowing the determination of one's own beliefs and semantics to be placed in motion by that process. This is the point that Gadamer makes in the reference to Heidegger just quoted. Perhaps surprisingly, then, to really listen to someone “means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such.” (Gadamer, 269)

world which leaves objective thought and thus the brain alone; while relating to transcendence and incorporating the existence of experience. [105]

Objective thought, being centreless (84) has no room for exactly what is distinctive about experience, namely that in being aware of experience we are conscious of ourselves as beings with a perspective on the world and thus as *centres* of experience. To accommodate—that is to *locate*—experience within objective thought (science), entails an act of conceptual destruction because, “if experiences are brain states, our conception of either experiences or brain states must be more or less completely wrong.” (100)

Tartaglia’s discussion of Daniel Dennett makes the point. Dennett famously attempts to dissolve the problem of consciousness by revealing the reification of phenomenology that our talk of experience seems to commit us to as an illusion. But when we are dealing with phenomenology, with appearance, the difficulty of capturing the illusion without undermining the claim that it is illusory seems insurmountable. Tartaglia observes:

And this gets to the heart of the difficulty with the revisionist position, which is that no matter how well-supported its rejection of consciousness as ordinarily conceived might be, such rejections will inevitably be made in the apparent presence of consciousness. Our most sincere denials that ‘that’ exists will not make ‘that’ go away. [92]

The direction of Tartaglia’s argument here is not to mount a challenge to scientific understanding. Science—objective thought—is the best guide to the nature of things that we have got. We must stand by science in its fundamentals, including its scope; to fully illuminate the objective world without remainder. And from Tartaglia’s point of view, Dennett is correct to be sceptical of the efforts in naturalist philosophy of mind to reify appearance; to reify phenomenology, to *locate it* in the spatio-temporal order, is, as Dennett rightly argues, to impute magical properties to material stuff, or, alternatively, simply to lose sight of appearance altogether. Moreover, Tartaglia agrees with Dennett (and any naturalist) that to try to save the objective reality of consciousness by imagining an objective order beyond the physical, in the manner of ontological dualism, is just to push back the problem. And yet, to deny the subjective aspect of experience,



awareness, seems impossible; the very protest against it seems to bring it back around. That is the critical juncture where Tartaglia and Dennett part ways; Dennett, presumably, sees no alternative but those just adumbrated. Tartaglia does; it is the transcendent hypothesis.

We have a model for the relation that Tartaglia wants; that between the experiences we undergo when dreaming and the reality that is our dreaming brain. He writes:

The equivalent conclusion would be that conscious experience must be identified with something within a wider context of existence than the world it presents: it must be identified with something transcendent to the objective world. If this is right, it would explain why consciousness apparently has no place within the objective world. The reason would be that it does not exist there, any more than dream experiences exist in the world of the dream. It could also explain why experiences exist in a context transcendent to the objective world in which brain states belong, making such an identity out of the question; just as an identity between a dream experience and a state of a dream-brain would be out of the question. [105]

I quote at length, because this is a highly significant passage. The line of thought may remind us of arguments intended to show that the world of objective science is not all there is—that the cold, meaningless, atoms-and-the-void reality revealed by science cannot be the ultimate ontological story, and that *therefore* the conclusion that existence is meaningless—as per the picture of the cold, meaningless, etc.—is unwarranted. That we are so reminded, supports one of the main contentions of *Meaningless*, namely that the ontological question of transcendence has been obscured by the presupposition that it concerns at its core the question of the meaning of life. And the question has indeed very naturally been raised and pursued largely in this context; it is another contention of *Meaningless* that a meaning of life, as opposed to social meaning, indeed requires a transcendental context. But, argues Tartaglia, that consciousness does require us to entertain the transcendent hypothesis has no tendency to show that bare philosophical nihilism is false. Nor, as I read *Meaningless*, is the point here simply that to establish transcendence is not yet to show that life as such has a meaning.

Rather, it seems to me, the very nature of the transcendent hypothesis tends to undercut philosophical and religious efforts to *establish* the meaningfulness of life.

The transcendent hypothesis, as I understand it, entails that as soon as we try to say something of specific substance about a context transcending the context of objective knowledge, a context indicated by the fact of conscious awareness, we are, at best, out of warrant, and at worst incoherent. As conscious beings, we come, through experience, to know the world objectively. *That* we do, points beyond what we objectively know. Our attempt as conscious beings to thematise—or locate—that which the fact of our awareness points toward, has no independent base, no experiential fund, no autonomous presence for us. Our grasp of it is parasitic on objective knowledge—amounting to what Tartaglia calls “*a shadow of objective thought.*” (108)

If this is so, then *only* what amounts to religious faith could ever provide a view of life as such as meaningful. And neither objective knowledge—*nor an elaboration of subjectivity*—could ever be invoked in support of such faith in an ultimate context of meaning; it would be *mere* faith. A concomitant lesson, made explicit by Tartaglia, is that denying transcendence by insisting that objective thought describes—in principle at least—an ontologically ultimate context, and so committing to the naturalist effort to reduce the subjective to the objective, is not required, neither in order to respect the claims of science nor to defend a humanistic view of the world.

If I have got things more or less right so far, then not only bare philosophical nihilism, but also the transcendent hypothesis, serve principally to dispel illusions and undercut a certain kind of futile intellectual ambition. As Tartaglia observes: “Nihilism’s consequences outside of philosophy are all negative; in that it only has practical potential because of its ability to relieve us of false beliefs:” (172) Within philosophy, though, these negatives may have positive consequences—in particular, there is the possibility of the kind of affirmative view of philosophy as an autonomous and substantive intellectual practice.

Consider the philosophical ambition of *closure*. This is the idea that there may be—perhaps only ideally and in principle, but nevertheless conceivably—a way to conceptualize explicitly a definitive metaphysical context, one that assigns to all that there is and all the ways of being there are their proper ontological place. Now one way to take bare philosophical nihilism is to say that there is no teleological closure—no ultimate *point* to what is. And one way to take the transcendent hypothesis is to say that there is no descriptive closure, either—no ultimate *conceptualization* of what there is. Well, how might these negative thoughts support a robust conception of philosophy? They might do that, it seems

to me, if we think of philosophy as a concern exactly with the openness that *closure* struggles against; articulating our experience of it and responding to those articulations. This is what I take Tartaglia to be suggesting. He argues for nihilism and transcendence, and he shows us what philosophy looks like if we think of it as a concern with a response to these facts.

What I would like to do now, however, is to try to make something out of the qualification that I have so far respected, the one that Tartaglia relies on as he constrains the significance of nihilism. It has only negative consequences, we are told, “outside philosophy.” However, perhaps what we do in philosophy may permeate conscious life in such a way that more practical applications of intellect are also shaped by it, and not just in an entirely contingent manner.

There are intellectual ambitions that are both philosophical and practical—*closure* is one such. And in undercutting the ambition of metaphysical closure, philosophy also pertains to human freedom. Admittedly, the connection is ambiguous, as we shall see. Moreover, freedom is not a topic that receives a great deal of explicit attention in *Meaningless*. Still the connection between philosophy and freedom is nevertheless strongly present in the book. It contributes to its force, it is of practical significance, and it isn’t captured simply in terms of correcting false beliefs or dispelling illusions. I will now try to indicate why I think this is so.

**IV. Articulating freedom,** elaborating its conditions and limitations metaphysically and politically, has been one preoccupation of philosophy from its inception. Though the connection between philosophy and freedom isn’t simply, from the perspective I should like to take, a matter of some philosophers’ concern with the nature and conditions of various forms of freedom. Rather, for sematic historicists—that is, people who think that meaning emerges in time and that conceptual resources are developed through intellectual communicative interaction; concepts are made, not discovered, in slightly misleading slogan form—philosophy has a more direct connection with the freedom characteristic of reflective human agency. That is because philosophy—as the invention, modification and elaboration of concepts—contributes resources serving the intellect’s ability to articulate, in more refined and fine-grained terms, such possibilities of deliberate agency as may be available to us. Philosophy, we might say, thereby *potentiates reflective agency*. We might note that this connection between philosophy and freedom is one reason why philosophy is different from

straightforwardly cumulative disciplines of knowledge. For this potentiation cannot be passed on the way information can be passed on. To be sure, we benefit from the philosophical struggles of past generations, but only, at least as far as the potentiation of reflective agency is concerned, by making their struggles our own, and then, perhaps, taking them further. Certain moves come easier to us, no doubt, because others have made them—in a manner akin to Hebbian long-term potentiation of synaptic networks—but even so, the firing needs to happen. As Tartaglia says, making what I take to be just this point, “every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own.” (181) They need to do that, because the particular connection between philosophy and agential power that I am homing in on here is available only as philosophy is performed, and not as its results are noted and filed.

This agential potentiation, though, is a contribution to freedom only at a highly abstract level. Agential potentiation through conceptual innovation may just as easily equip human beings to act against freedom more concretely conceived, as happens when sophisticated theoretical endeavours of human intellect call forth systems of political oppression. There is no intrinsic connection between philosophical thought and concrete political freedom of the sort that democracies are designed to protect. However, a philosopher may *commit* to democratic freedom, and deploy philosophy in the service of that end. This is the explicit agenda of Richard Rorty.<sup>6</sup> For Rorty, placing himself in the tradition of John Dewey, the point of philosophy should be to serve the human good, and that means, for a Deweyan pragmatist, contributing to our conception of and prospects for attaining a society of justice, equality and individual freedom.

This is a broad and sweeping agenda, and I shall confine myself to one point in connection with it that I think is pertinent to *Meaningless*. We might give it this heading: Philosophy of freedom as anti-authoritarianism. Both Rorty and Tartaglia are anti-authoritarians, in a manner that comes to expression in how they philosophize. For that reason, it is instructive to consider some of the differences between them.

For Rorty, a particular responsibility of philosophers in the struggle for democracy is to combat intellectual authoritarianism. Rorty’s denial of the idea of human nature, his scepticism toward the idea of truth as representation, toward

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Richard Rorty, 1990. “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 175-196.

foundationalist epistemological aspirations, and toward the rhetoric of objectivity, his hostility toward metaphysics, his Darwinian-constructivist view of linguistic meaning, his instrumentalist philosophy of science, as well as his anti-essentialist view of philosophy—these are, I think, all best understood as results of Rorty's efforts to follow through on the commitment to anti-authoritarian pragmatism, which is essentially a political interpretation of the ancient view of philosophy as *ameliorative*.

For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them. His counter-position is to advance a view of democracy centred on the idea that our most important obligation is to ensure the widest possible effective access to deliberative political conversation. One important aspect of that effort was to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others, to listen in that hermeneutical sense of which I attempted to give a flavour a few paragraphs ago.

Now, this anti-authoritarian commitment in Rorty, which I interpret as an effort to philosophically strengthen our capacity and willingness to listen to those who think and speak differently from ourselves, led Rorty to be critical of some of the characteristically modernist, humanist commitments deeply embedded in the discourse of mainstream 20th century analytic philosophy. He noted the historical transformations of originally liberating notions like reason, truth, method, representation, and objectivity into scaffoldings for hierarchies and authority structures, and called them out. The result, when interpreted as philosophical doctrine, seemed to fit right into the interconnected set of constructivist ideas that make up what we call post-modernism. And this is where it may be useful to contrast Rorty with the form of anti-authoritarianism that shapes *Meaningless*. For Tartaglia is in several places quite critical of Rorty, and he is throughout the book clear on his dim view of what he takes to be the excesses of postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, I contend, *Meaningless* shares the anti-

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Tartaglia describes a “natural next step” upon the loss of God as a transcendent source of meaning:

This was to deny that there is any objective truth whatsoever, such that nothing holds true independently of human opinion, and everything is endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This extreme relativism, which is sometimes called postmodernism, is the most recent stage in the intellectual flight from nihilism. [59]

Rorty is taken to task for failing to acknowledge the difference between evaluations and facts, and for thinking that nihilism requires an ironic stance toward life (176). I think much could be said on Rorty's

authoritarian thrust that was the explicit guiding thought in much of Rorty's philosophy.

The point here is not to defend Rorty against Tartaglia's criticisms—rather it is to consider whether the differences between Rorty and Tartaglia may tell us something about the connection between philosophy and anti-authoritarianism.

For Rorty, anti-authoritarianism is an end to which philosophical reflection may be put. Its special pertinence lies in the fact that philosophy itself may so easily be brought in to bolster an authoritarian impulse, to serve it and disguise it at the same time. Thus, for Rorty, it is a moral imperative, not a philosophical one, to engage in anti-authoritarian metaphilosophical criticism, and to provide ways of describing human practice that foster democratic attitudes, the art of listening. The challenge that this pragmatic stance faces, however, is that once we are persuaded that philosophy is only a tool, that it has no constraining project of its own, no purpose or unity intrinsic to it, we discover that we are already losing our grip on that tool, and we find that it becomes almost impossible to do anything with it. I think of this predicament as the pragmatic collapse of philosophy.

Now, what about *Meaningless*? In a section of the book entitled, "Living with nihilism," Tartaglia points out us that, "[...]the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness." (172) "Bossiness" in this context is exactly the sort of intellectual authoritarianism that also is Rorty's target.<sup>8</sup> But what is the significance of Tartaglia's remark? Is it a by-the-way observation? Is it an aside, meant to assure those who may be concerned about the potential of philosophical theory to support bossiness that in this case they need not worry, that their concern should not keep them from considering nihilism more closely?

The significance, I think, lies in the fact that anti-authoritarianism is not a contingent, optional add-on to the *Meaningless* system. The reason is that a philosophical truth that provides no platform for bossiness in fact undermines it. For *without* a philosophical platform, intellectual bossiness collapses. Intellectual bossiness, in the requisite sense, just is to provide justification for authoritarian, non-listening attitudes. And as a philosophical truth nihilism occupies exactly the place where such justification would be located. Its negative force has the positive

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behalf on both these points, but that is not an important matter in the present context.

<sup>8</sup> As I alluded to earlier, philosophical accounts of human nature have served horrific instances of bossiness, both intellectual and practical. But the tendency is quite ubiquitous. To take but one example; physicalist metaphysics (not neuroscience) provides intellectual support for bossy dismissiveness of various forms of non-biological strategies for coping with mental health issues.

consequence that authoritarians will find it harder to use philosophy to disguise the fact that they really are bullies and thugs.

The transcendent hypothesis provides not just a way of reading the various dialectical struggles of philosophy, but it tilts the reading toward finding an essential philosophical concern with openness. Where Rorty's anti-authoritarianism is a chosen stance, the transcendent hypothesis expresses a different relation between philosophy and human freedom. For a pragmatist like Rorty, the power of philosophy to serve the moral ends of the philosopher is weakened by the fact that philosophy is not acknowledged as a substantive project—reducing philosophy to a toolbox handed down to us as a rag-tag product of contingent cultural evolution is also pretty much to empty out the box. On the transcendent hypothesis, by contrast, the concern with openness goes beyond the instrumental and the political, it is an inherently philosophical concern. There is no guarantee that philosophy will serve openness. But when it does, it does so on terms that are genuinely its own. And that serves, not entirely paradoxically, to increase its potential for instrumental and political effect.

I'd like, in conclusion, to venture some bald, brief, and sketchy assertions about this openness to which the transcendent hypothesis points, as a dynamic and ineliminable incompleteness.

**V. Finitude** is a characteristic of human life in a number of ways, and Tartaglia recognizes it as a proper entry point into philosophy:

Let us say, then, that questions concerning human finitude and the meaning of life are paradigmatically philosophical questions, to which religions have provided the best-known and most widely-believed answers. These questions have persisted since the dawn of civilization, and are renewed within each new generation by those that feel the need to answer them. [63]

Typically, in these contexts, our finitude is construed in terms of limitation; how little we know, how limited our powers are, how woefully temporary are our lives. However this may be, though, I think that things we cherish and deeply identify with—freedom, agency, and thought—even consciousness, these are all aspects and attributes of human finitude. All these are features of beings that are centres of experience, beings that embody and enjoy perspective. Articulation, action, awareness—these are all matters of navigating limits, of detecting or determining

form in contexts where many forms are possible. Such determinations invariably point beyond themselves. Revealing, by selecting, is also always concealing, as we know, but it is equally a matter of bringing forth new possibilities for revelation.

It is a hermeneutic insight that no interpretation is ever final, that there is always more to be said. But when Gadamer makes this essentially Heideggerian point, he is not simply drawing attention in a defeatist way to the fact that we, limited creatures, cannot ever hope to enumerate all the true descriptions there may be of even some insignificant little point of joint concern, some small piece of common reality. Rather the point is that every saying, every articulation, brings with it—brings into being—new possibilities for response and reaction. Finitude, in the form of perspective, of awareness, of conceptualization, is always in the process of going beyond what it brings forth. Human finitude is essentially creative, because to be human is to be essentially unfinished.

Have I veered away from *Meaningless*? Tartaglia, towards the end of the book, contemplates the possible fate of the transcendent hypothesis in a world where philosophical nihilism had been accepted: “Before long, the hypothesis might become barely recognizable, with new forms of opposition springing up to replace the old stand-off between denying and affirming transcendence.” (181-182) The “system of nihilism, consciousness and reality” is not, then, built to last. It sets up a perspective that immediately raises the prospect of its own transformation. As far as I can tell, this is part of the central message of *Meaningless* about what it is to *be* a perspective—to always point beyond that which can be articulated and illuminated by virtue of it, toward what it *is*—from some other perspective. Ah—if only I could clearly see what it is I am trying to think now...



## Reply to Bjørn Ramberg

James Tartaglia\*

Bjørn Ramberg asks his readers to, ‘try to be guided, as you construe me, by what is my central concern. And please don’t impose on my words your semantic ready-mades, your fast-thoughts, your blocking responses’ (p. 141). An excellent piece of advice, and one which I had no trouble following, given that I could readily see his central concern, and completely agreed (no qualifications) with his interpretation of my book. Had the latter not been the case, the advice would have been harder to follow; but more valuable. For when reading something in philosophy with which you are instinctively inclined to disagree, especially when your own views are being targeted, there is little point responding unless you try to see where the other is coming from; their central concern, motivating them to look for gaps and weaknesses. There is little point, because if you just throw out your ‘blocking responses’, you will neither learn from the encounter, nor have much chance of persuading your interlocutor; or others with the same kind of central concern. We all have our philosophical instincts, but unless we make the effort to empathise with others, our own will become inflexible, making it harder to reassure ourselves they are rational. Philosophy of mind provides my favourite example, where some philosophers today think their opponents are mad – well, perhaps they do not really think that, but they do like to suggest that it is the only reasonable conclusion to draw. This is frustration, and hampers the prospects for constructive engagement. They are probably right that the ‘mad’ philosophers will not be persuaded; neither will they. But others less entrenched in the debate might have been, if they had looked for the kind of central concern which might lead someone to write mad-sounding things, thinking them sensible.

Ramberg’s central concern in his paper, I think, is to discover the central concern of my book. He sees all of these interlocking themes, concerning nihilism, transcendence, consciousness, and the autonomy of philosophy, and he wonders what is driving them. More specifically, he wonders if it is a central concern which he himself is on-board with; one concerning intellectual freedom. Basically, he

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wonders if we have the same kind of central concern. I think we do.

To give Ramberg's advice a twist, however, I will start trying to illuminate this matter by throwing out just one of my 'semantic ready-mades' – the only one that even tempted me when I read his paper. I do not equate science with objective thought. When I instinctively make sense of the room around me in terms of physical objects in spatial relationships to each other, I am employing objective thought; but there is nothing remotely scientific about it. It is a natural way of thinking. Science is a development of that natural way of thinking; the best we have or are ever liable to get. Quine liked to say that science is a development of common sense, and to this extent, he was right. But we have another way of thinking, which arises equally naturally, albeit only explicitly within a more limited set of circumstances, and which has been a principle focus of all the great philosophical traditions. This is subjective thought. When we cannot readily think of what we are aware of as something in the physical world, as when we feel a sudden rush of enthusiasm, or see a blind spot of shimmering mercury while suffering from a migraine, then we think of it as experience. Just as science is our most sophisticated extension of objective thought, philosophy is our most sophisticated extension of subjective thought; for it is only with the latter, in conjunction with the former, that we can try to make sense of distinctively human concerns such as freedom.

Now in *Meaningless*, I argued that subjective thought is parasitic upon objective thought. Many philosophers within what I think of as the broadly idealist tradition, past and present, have instead seen subjective thought as a kind of rival to objective thought, or else as something which shows an inadequacy in it; as if objective thinking needed to either catch up or fail. I share what I think is their central concern, these days at least, namely with the imperialistic ambitions of the scientific extension of objective thought, represented within academic philosophy under the heading 'physicalism' – or 'naturalism', when the emphasis is on epistemology rather than metaphysics. But I think an overly trusting attitude to subjective thought provides a weak basis for trying to do something positive about that concern. For as soon as you try to say something on its basis, the substance slips away, leaving you with only threadbare appeals to ineffability and a desire to say inarticulate things like, 'you know what I mean ... *that* particular feeling of pain, or the particular blueness, not of the sky, but of your experience.'

The substance returns when you realise that whenever you try to think about things both substantively and subjectively, you must lean on objective thought;

but that where objective thought really does leave you short is over the fact that there is anything to think about at all. For we each think from an experiential, subjective perspective; reality appears to us from such perspectives and we think about it, even if what we think casts doubt on the notion of ‘subjective perspective’, exactly because it leans on objective thought. In metaphysics, subjective thinking points you in the right direction, then leaves you cold. But once you arrive, there is plenty to think about; in the company of all those who have been there before and are there now. For it was from this kind of subjective perspective that people formed the idea that they were free; that action was required of them, and so it was their responsibility to decide and act. It was from this perspective that people wondered if their lives had meaning. And it is from this perspective that, when we try to make sense of matters like these, we exercise our intellectual freedom to think philosophically.

Thus the great significance of subjective thought, it seems to me, is that it brings us to the inside of human life, where philosophical questions arise. We have no choice but to think that way when circumstances make subjective thinking the only natural kind; but philosophers have chosen to develop it, realising that a distinctive set of the questions that we naturally ask depends on it. Physicalism, however, wants to close this kind of thinking off, with a metaphysical interpretation of the scientific extension of objective thinking. If we had only ever thought objectively, somehow oblivious to our subjective perspectives, then it is hard to see how we would have ever thought of the traditional problems of philosophy. If I thought of myself and others equally objectively, then why would I – how *could* I, even – come to think of these objects as free? Because they do unpredictable things, perhaps? (It would be hard to think this in your own case.) But then the weather would seem just as ‘free’ as people do. The problem would never have arisen.

And that is very much the point of physicalism, just as it was the point of its predecessors in the analytic philosophy movement, namely ideal language philosophy, ordinary language philosophy and logical positivism; in each case, it was the *appearance* of genuine philosophical problems that was to be removed through analysis. For if we look at the world entirely objectively, as physicalists suggest, then there are no philosophical problems; or, if you prefer, the intellectual relics we call ‘philosophical problems’ are revealed to be the products of natural illusion; relics such as thinking you are free, conscious, and currently at a certain stage of your life. You could call the problem of reconciling quantum mechanics

with relativity theory a philosophical problem, if you like, but it looks for all the world like a scientific problem, and so unless you are prepared to bring in illusionary intuitions based on our apparently subjective perspectives – ordinary conceptions of time, for instance – then your choice of label is going to look pretty dubious. The irony is that physicalism itself, as a metaphysical thesis about the fundamental nature of reality, only makes sense in light of subjective perspectives; for if the ‘fundamentality’ of the physical particles is not to be contrasted with the non-fundamental status of minds, as in the traditional opposition between realism and idealism, then it no longer means anything. But again this is very much the point of physicalism – not that I think many of its advocates realise – namely to take us beyond the urge to philosophically scrutinise the scientific picture, to a place where we just trust it. Physicalism aims to lose its own metaphysical status and hence itself; it is a bridging device.

Develop the natural objective and subjective ways we have of thinking about the world, then, and the former gets you science while the latter gets you philosophy; or at least, that is how it turned out in our world. Subjective thought does not negate objective thought, but rather contextualises it. But try to make a philosophy out of science, and philosophy is negated. For if we resolve to think only like a scientist at work, subjective thought must be intellectually disavowed; we must now think only of what the objective picture tells us, and refuse to contextualise it within our own individual perspectives. The contextualisation provided by subjective thought is vitally important, however; it is not something we want to lose, and so physicalism must be resisted with maximum effort. For it is within our individual perspectives that the fundamental reality – the only one there is – is there to be reflected upon by *everyone*; disavow those perspectives and it becomes an esoteric topic that only scientists can contemplate by means of their allegedly beautiful mathematical theories. But natural human questions about the meaning of life, or why there is something rather than nothing, are as real as they seem to be. Our lives themselves, as we live them from our insider perspectives, are as real as they seem to be; not just an illusionary take on something radically unfamiliar. Philosophy interprets and elucidates; it should not seek to obliterate. When it does, in the shape of physicalism, then its days are numbered; one way or the other.

The contextualisation subjective thought provided me with is that the scientific development of objective thought provides a model of how things appear within human consciousness, not the final story about how reality is, or

even a marker on the road to that final story. To think otherwise, is to try to make consciousness disappear, rather than to try to impose some human order upon it with objective thought. The recognition of the transcendence of reality is the most final story we can have, for when we recognise the limits of both subjective and objective thinking – for the former, bare pointing, and for the latter, endlessly detailed modelling of the kind of things which could cause what we point to, when what we point to is conceived along the original lines of the model – then we are able to rationally assure ourselves we should not try to go further. But it does not provide closure, only an invitation to think through our place within a reality which always outstrips our best descriptive efforts, as part of an ongoing historical conversation. Ramberg asks whether, ‘finitude and transcendence are a package deal, so that emphasizing one may be a way to illuminate the other’ (p. 140). Yes, exactly.

Now Ramberg pays special attention to my claim that nihilism’s consequences ‘outside of philosophy’ are all negative (p. 145). So did two other contributors to this symposium, Llanera and Malachowski, and it was the focus of one of the reviews of my book, by Hawkins, which I discuss in the Introduction. Only Ramberg, however, considers the possibility that the consequences *inside* philosophy might be both positive and practical; this is where his paper gets particularly interesting and perceptive, I think. If you think of philosophy as just an academic speciality, then the notion of it having practical consequences might make you think of its practitioners directly applying themselves to practical problems in the world today; this is the ideal of pragmatist philosophy. But my emphasis on the naturalness of philosophical questions, and the fact that I led with one of the most natural philosophical of all, that of the meaning of life, ought to have indicated that I do not.

Ramberg wonders if, ‘perhaps what we do in philosophy may permeate conscious life in such a way that more practical applications of intellect are also shaped by it, and not just in an entirely contingent manner’ (p. 146). That is how I think philosophy exerts a practical influence; the ‘practical applications of intellect’ are not made by professional philosophers, but by people with more practical intellects, who have absorbed the prevailing philosophical atmosphere. That atmosphere at the moment, at least in the rich, secular world which drives social change, is physicalist. We see the effect as people, now used to casually relating what their brains make them do, live with only occasional, absent-minded curiosity about how the next technological breakthrough will radically transform

their lives; hopefully in a manner which will not put them out of a job. The philosophy which drives this is invisible, just as it wants to be: it wants us to see only science. Natural philosophical questions are thereby discouraged. But if they were rather developed, through a change of atmosphere, then we might start to see very different practical applications of intellect.

As Ramberg very neatly puts it, nihilism tells us we cannot have teleological closure, and transcendence tells us we cannot have descriptive closure (p. 145). And yet religions offer us teleological closure and physicalist philosophy offers us descriptive closure; both hoping very much to close each other down through our acceptance of their respective offers. If we turn them both down, however, and reside somewhere in the middle, with nihilism and transcendence, then we may start thinking a little more. For teleological closure is not something we need to think through; only accept and live. And neither is descriptive closure; to get this, we just need to let the scientists do the thinking for us. Those offering closure have no ambition to invigorate public intellectual life by promoting intellectual freedom. But philosophy always should. Its traditional ambition is not closure, but openness.

Ramberg finds an anti-authoritarian strand to my thinking which he also finds in Rorty. That may well be what attracted me to Rorty in the first place, since I liked the fact that he focused on questions concerning the nature of philosophy: metaphilosophy. This is certainly an anti-authoritarian preoccupation, liable to hold special appeal only to those who are not satisfied to just get on with what everyone else is doing at the moment, because they want to question whether everyone else is doing the right kind of thing, and to do something different if they are not. Rorty certainly wanted to do something different; the figures he felt most enthusiasm for within the analytic philosophy happening around him, most notably Quine, Sellars and Davidson, were those he was able to read, however forcibly, as undermining analytic philosophy. What he really wanted to do, as Ramberg says, was to place philosophy in the service of democratic freedom. To this effect, he 'noted the historical transformations of originally liberating notions like reason, truth, method, representation, and objectivity into scaffoldings for hierarchies and authority structures, and called them out' (p. 148).

The problem with his efforts, according to the analysis I share with Ramberg, is that once he had divested from philosophy any source of distinctiveness, he had no leg to stand on. People listened alright, and they still do; because he became a famous intellectual off the back of philosophy. But given his overall message, his

support of democratic freedom would have had more intellectual credibility if he had not been a philosopher; Chomsky does better because he has scientific credentials. Ramberg memorably dubs this predicament, ‘the pragmatic collapse of philosophy’ (p. 149). It is an honest predicament if you are a philosophy professor who buys all that anti-philosophy stuff but who still wants to make a positive difference in the world; and Rorty was nothing if not honest. It is just a shame he did buy it. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* had a formative influence on me. It seems to take us on a journey to a new and rosier future for philosophy, which is what I instinctively wanted. But this is not the destination, as you discover in the final chapter. He had a good title, ‘Philosophy without Mirrors’, but nothing to back it up; it turns out not to be philosophy at all, but rather ‘kibitzing’ between other academic disciplines, the legitimate ones, to keep them free of philosophy (Rorty 1979: 393). And to add insult to injury, Rorty tells us to embrace physicalism as a kind of Kantian moral choice in that chapter (ibid.: 382-389); as if to turn away from philosophy and towards science were to do the right thing.

Despite himself, Rorty did have very strong philosophical views: he held that there is no objective truth and that everything can be endlessly redescribed. These are the philosophical expressions of anti-authoritarianism which he weaved his messages about democratic freedom around. The problem is that they are radically implausible, and the main reason for this, within our current intellectual climate, is the authority science enjoys; which Rorty supported by endorsing physicalism. Of course, his own, idiosyncratic brand of physicalism was supposed to be a non-metaphysical one, compatible with the endless redescription thesis – but note well his instincts: if the scientific description has potential to serve authoritarian aims, then it must be *philosophy’s* fault. Not that he was altogether wrong, because metaphysical (normal) physicalism is indeed a philosophy. But it is only *one* kind of philosophy. And the big picture Rorty missed is that if philosophy fades from our horizons, as he wanted, then the scientific description will not be viewed as simply one description among others, but rather as the one which offers closure, thereby providing authority to those who yield it. You cannot redescribe scientific theories; when postmodernists try, telling us that  $E=Mc^2$  is a ‘sexed equation’, to take one memorable example, the scientists just have a laugh (see Sokal and Bricmont 1999). But philosophy can credibly contextualise the scientific description as a whole, by placing it within the context of the experiential perspectives from which we live our lives; with our lives on its side, nothing could

be more credible. It cannot do this, however, while it is so wracked with self-doubt that it turns on its traditional resources in an effort to discredit the natural philosophical questions which people instinctively raise; questions those resources were built up to service.

Have I now revealed my central concern in *Meaningless*? The emphasis I have been placing on physicalism more squarely relates to what started to become my central concern immediately after I finished that book; my central concern now. At the time, I was more concerned to present the metaphysic which had resulted from the process of freeing myself from physicalism; and to show the positive light in which it places philosophy, against a deafening background of anti-philosophy. You might say that I was then more concerned with exercising my own intellectual freedom, and have since looked outwards, seeing the physicalism which once had an irrational hold over me, as the contemporary foundation of anti-philosophy; and anti-philosophy not as a challenge to my personal loyalties, but rather as a concrete problem for the world within our present circumstances. Still, the connection is plain enough, so when I look back over Ramberg's essay, especially in light of his final sentence, I wonder if he has been better able to see my central concern than I was at the time.

When we think of reality as meaningless and transcendent, thereby interrupting our more familiar interpretations of it, we are invited to think; if only to kick back against the initial thought. When critics of philosophy tell you it never makes progress, they reveal their desire for closure. Sure, we do close off some problems by solving them, or by realising they were confused. But the real progress occurs with the ones worth sticking with; both personally and inter-generationally. Think of philosophy on the model of science and it looks terrible. Think of science on the model of philosophy and it looks terrible too.

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# How Human Life Could be Unintended but Meaningful

## A Reply to Tartaglia

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### Abstract

The question “What is the meaning of life?” is longstanding and important, but has been shunned by philosophers for decades. Instead, contemporary philosophers have focused on other questions, such as “What gives meaning to the life of a person?” According to James Tartaglia, this research on “meaning in life” is shallow and pointless. He urges philosophers to redirect their attention back to the fundamental question about “meaning of life.” Tartaglia argues that humanity was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless. He assumes that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. I will outline a different way that humanity could become meaningful. In addition, I will explain how the research on “meaning in life” is important for understanding how humanity could become meaningful.

### 1. Introduction

We live our lives, expending great effort to remain alive and achieve our goals, without knowing whether human life is meaningful. Laypeople often assume that philosophers seek to answer the question “What is the meaning of life?”<sup>1</sup> Actually, only a small number of philosophers give attention to questions about the meaning of life.<sup>2</sup> And when they reflect on these questions, they typically do so from a theistic perspective – a view that many people no longer find credible. I will examine these questions from a naturalistic perspective.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among philosophers in the topic of meaningfulness. However, instead of focusing on the traditional questions about meaning of life that preoccupied existentialists, contemporary philosophers strive to explain what gives meaning to the life of *a person*. They refer to this latter topic as “meaning *in* life” to distinguish it from questions about the “meaning *of* human life” in general. Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz – leading

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<sup>1</sup> Laypeople often also assume that philosophy is “all about” the meaning of life. Tartaglia (2016b) argues for this view.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Cottingham (2003), Cooper (2005), and Seachris (2009).

figures in this research – have each proposed a theory of meaning in life.<sup>3</sup> These theories support *objective naturalism* – the view that one accrues meaning in one’s life by engaging with inherently valuable and natural, mind-independent goods.

James Tartaglia is harshly critical of this work by these philosophers. He contends that this research is shallow,<sup>4</sup> pointless,<sup>5</sup> and can be misleading.<sup>6</sup> He argues that there is nothing philosophical about identifying what makes a person’s life more meaningful.<sup>7</sup> He seems to think that one can find this in a self-help book.

Regarding the topic of meaningfulness, Tartaglia claims that there is only one truly important question: “[W]hat are we here for?”<sup>8</sup> This focus on “meaning in life” has diverted our attention from this question, he argues. Tartaglia acknowledges that there is meaning *in* life – what he refers to as “social meaning.” However, he argues that human life was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless.

“Life” can refer to *a human being* or all of humanity, which can lead to confusion in this debate about meaningfulness. Take, for example, the title of Tartaglia’s book: *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. With this title, some potential readers might assume that the book is about the life of a person. However, in reading the book, it quickly becomes clear that Tartaglia is referring to human life, as a whole.

As with “life,” “humanity” can be thought of in multiple ways. Humanity can be conceived *as a whole* or as the *many individuals* that make up the whole.<sup>9</sup> These two different metaphysical conceptions of humanity give rise to two different ways of thinking about how humanity could be meaningful. With the traditional, *holistic* account of meaning of life, a meaning of life is conceived as a meaning that is possessed by humanity, as a whole. There is, however, an alternative, *individualistic* conception of meaning of life that I will outline. By engaging with inherently valuable and natural goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives, which in turn adds meaning to humanity from the “bottom-up,” as I will hypothesize.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Wolf (2010) and Metz (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 98 and (2016a), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Tartaglia (2015), pp. 95, 102 and (2016a), pp. 4, 16. See Metz (2016a) for his response to the criticisms by Tartaglia and others.

<sup>8</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> I will use the terms “humanity” and “human life” interchangeably.

<sup>10</sup> I initially discussed this view in Trisel (2016). I further develop this view in this paper.

In the next section, I will provide an overview of Tartaglia's nihilism. Many people, including Tartaglia, assume that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. In section three, I will seek to demonstrate that this assumption is false. Then, in section four, I will compare the holistic and individualistic accounts of how humanity could be meaningful and will point out some problems with Tartaglia's holistic account. In section five, I will advocate for the individualistic account. In addition, I will explain how the research on "meaning in life" is important for understanding how humanity could become meaningful.

## 2. An Overview of Tartaglia's Nihilism

In the social framework in which we live our lives, there are pre-existing traditions, organizations, and fields of endeavor that one can join, as Tartaglia indicates.<sup>11</sup> Our individual activities can be meaningful because they are situated within the context of meaning provided by the social framework. Likewise, for human life, as a whole, to be meaningful, it must exist within a wider context of meaning, Tartaglia argues. Tartaglia claims that the physical universe does not provide life with a context of meaning. Therefore, he contends that a "transcendent context of meaning" is necessary for life to be meaningful.<sup>12</sup>

Tartaglia hypothesizes that consciousness transcends the objective world. If true, this opens up a possibility that reality transcends the physical universe, he argues.<sup>13</sup>

Tartaglia indicates that if humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent context of meaning, "We might be here to *do* something, and so discovering the reason might persuade us to change our lives."<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, "the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable."<sup>15</sup> However, he later concludes, "even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11, 85-86.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 52 (emphasis in original).

Despite its negative connotations, Tartaglia adopts “nihilism” as the name for his view that human life is meaningless.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to some nihilists, Tartaglia does not deny that there are values or objective truths. In fact, he claims that existential nihilism is an objective truth.<sup>18</sup>

Within the social framework, people pursue various goals such as to graduate from college, get married, and have children, but these goals are nothing more than “socially constructed impositions upon life . . . ,” Tartaglia argues.<sup>19</sup> Although our goals can seem like absolute imperatives, when we step outside of the social framework, we see that every human goal is “optional and ultimately pointless,” according to Tartaglia.<sup>20</sup>

Tartaglia expresses admiration for the religious-based way in which John Cottingham and Joshua Seachris have analyzed questions about life’s meaning.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Tartaglia does not discuss the characteristics of his envisioned “transcendent context of meaning” or use the words “God” or “transcendent being.” Rather, he tries to distance his view from theistic accounts of transcendence. For example, he argues, “there is no need to associate transcendence with religious meaning . . . .”<sup>22</sup>

The transcendent context of meaning, as imagined by Tartaglia, has the ability to create the universe and human life *for a purpose*. To have this ability, it would be necessary for the “transcendent context of meaning” to think, plan, and have a goal(s). Thus, although Tartaglia does not mention “God” or a “transcendent being,” I will sometimes refer to his envisioned “transcendent context of meaning” as a “transcendent being.”

Tartaglia’s argument that life is meaningless, in the absence of a transcendent context of meaning, is similar to the argument made by some theists, such as William Lane Craig, who contend that life without God would be meaningless.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike Craig, Tartaglia does not think that nihilism is “bad.”<sup>24</sup> He thinks it is just a “neutral fact.”<sup>25</sup> Tartaglia is adamant that nihilism will not lead

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., on p. 19, Tartaglia discusses Cottingham (2003) and Seachris (2013a).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> See Craig (2000).

<sup>24</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 5-6. Another difference between the views of Tartaglia and Craig is that Craig maintains that God and personal immortality are both necessary for life to be meaningful. Tartaglia does not discuss personal immortality.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

us to give up on, or care less about, our projects, activities, and relationships because when we realize there is no purpose of life, we will then step back into the social framework and reengage with our goals.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Why Transcendence is Unnecessary for Humanity to be Meaningful

Tartaglia argues that the famous question, “What is the meaning of life?” boils down to the question “[W]hat are we here for?”<sup>27</sup> I disagree. This latter question is too narrowly focused to serve as a guide in our search for a meaning of life. As philosophers have long recognized, there is an *amalgam* of questions about meaning of life, including the question “What makes life valuable?”<sup>28</sup> This latter question holds out the possibility that human life could be meaningful and valuable regardless of whether it was created for a purpose.

The universe does not exist for a purpose and, therefore, human life does not exist within a wider, context of meaning, Tartaglia contends. Tartaglia uses the phrase “context of meaning,” in an *overly narrow* way, to mean a context that has a purpose. As I will argue, the universe provides human life with a context of meaning despite whether the universe was created for a purpose or is inherently purposeful.

By comparing the universe to other contexts that would be unsupportive of leading meaningful lives, as I will do, it becomes clear that the universe provides human life with a context of meaning. There are different ways that a context could be unsupportive of human flourishing. First, there might be a zero probability that intelligent life would originate in the context. Second, the context might be habitable to intelligent life, but the nature of that context might prevent one from engaging in meaning-conferring activities. For example, the species might have to spend all of its time searching for food and shelter and have no time left for meaningful activities. Alternatively, the species might have time to create things of value, such as artwork, but these things might disintegrate as soon as they are created.

We naturally emerged in this universe and it unknowingly nourishes and sustains us. Although the things we create do not last forever, they generally last

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 43, 175. In contrast, Kahane (2016) argues that belief in nihilism would have detrimental consequences.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Hepburn (2000), pp. 261-276. For more discussion about the “amalgam thesis,” see Seachris (2013b), pp. 9-10.

long enough for them to enrich our lives. The universe has given rise to some intrinsically valuable goods. Goods often mentioned by objectivists include knowledge, autonomy, loving relationships, achievements, and excellence. By pursuing and promoting these and other goods, it adds meaning to our lives, and does so regardless of whether there is a transcendent context of meaning.

Early in his book, Tartaglia argues that a transcendent context of meaning is necessary for life to be meaningful. Later, he adds a new requirement - that this transcendent context of meaning be a “final context,” which is a context that “does not depend for its existence upon another, wider context.”<sup>29</sup> He contends that this is not an overly strong requirement. Unless the context is final, we could disengage from a purpose for which life was created, which would make it merely an optional pursuit within life instead of something that is constitutive of life, according to Tartaglia. He indicates that the purpose “would have to be something that determines the significance of our behaviour whether we like it or not . . . it would be like a game we could not stop playing.”<sup>30</sup>

Under these conditions, it becomes difficult to see how we could have free will. Even if the purpose was not worth our efforts or evil, we *could not stop* implementing it.

If the purpose would have to “determine the significance” of our behavior, as Tartaglia indicates, does this mean that we could not make any decisions on our own? Alternatively, does it mean that we could make some decisions, but that these decisions could be overridden? For example, if you want to spend time with a loved one, could the purpose or transcendent being override your decision and force you to do something else instead? As Robert Nozick indicated, “Without free will we seem diminished, merely the playthings of external causes. Our value seems undercut.”<sup>31</sup>

Kurt Baier, in a well-known lecture, argued that having a purpose imposed upon us by a superior being would be degrading. He writes, “If . . . I ask a man . . . ‘What is your purpose?’ I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, ‘What are you *for*?’ Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave.”<sup>32</sup> In response, Metz has argued that it would not necessarily be disrespectful for God to have assigned human life a purpose.<sup>33</sup> If God assigned

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<sup>29</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 2. See also discussion by Fischer (2005).

<sup>32</sup> Baier (2000), p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> Metz (2000), pp. 297-300 and (2013), pp. 102-103.

the purpose as a request rather than a command, then this need not be degrading. I believe this is correct. However, having a purpose imposed upon us in the controlling way that Tartaglia envisions would be degrading.

Tartaglia compares a meaning of life to the possibility of achieving checkmate in chess. He seems disappointed that human life does not have a purpose, as does a game of chess. Under the conditions that Tartaglia claims are necessary for life to be meaningful, human beings would be like the pawns in the game of chess. Even if we achieved the purpose for which we were created, because our actions were predetermined, or at least heavily influenced, this achievement would not be *our own*. Rather, it would be an achievement *by the transcendent being*.

Some people feel threatened by the thought that life arose through chance. For example, Craig argues that, if the universe and humanity arose through chance, “Man is just a lump of slime that evolved into rationality.”<sup>34</sup> If life originated by chance, this suggests that life was *unintended* and that it was *contingent*, meaning that there was a possibility it might never have come into existence. Craig and Tartaglia falsely assume that being created for a purpose by a transcendent being is the only way that humanity could be meaningful. There is, however, *another pathway* by which humanity could be meaningful. By engaging with the intrinsically valuable goods in the universe, it adds meaning to our individual lives, which in turn adds meaning to humanity.

Tartaglia acknowledges that our individual lives are “contingently valuable.” He writes, “For although our nature is not intrinsically valuable, we value many things, including ourselves. We might not have done so, so this value is not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value.”<sup>35</sup> He laments that value “does not flow inevitably from our nature . . . .”<sup>36</sup> Tartaglia assumes that if there were a transcendent context of meaning, and if this context explained why we exist, that this would somehow make human life inevitably valuable. However, this is a false assumption because even if human life were created for a worthy purpose by a transcendent being, human life would still be contingently valuable because the transcendent being *could have decided not to create us*.<sup>37</sup>

Why do some people want human life to have been inevitable? They think that being inevitable would make life valuable, but this is not necessarily true.

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<sup>34</sup> Craig (2000), p. 45. Tartaglia (2016a) discusses contingency on p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> For earlier discussion about contingency, see Trisel (2012b) and Metz (2013), pp. 83-84. Seachris (2013a, p. 609) acknowledges that humanity is contingent from the perspective of Christianity.

Consider, for example, bedbugs – an insect that feeds on blood. Even if the universe was non-contingent, such as being infinitely old, and it was inevitable that bedbugs would arise in this universe, bedbugs would still not be valuable.

Early in his book, Tartaglia asserts that the hypothesis of a transcendent meaning is “worthy of faith,”<sup>38</sup> but later he discards this hypothesis because it is too remote of a possibility to be taken seriously.<sup>39</sup> There is an additional reason to reject the hypothesis that humanity was created by a transcendent being to “do something.” If humanity had been created to carry out a purpose, our role would have been revealed to us long ago. It would be self-defeating for a transcendent being to give humanity a role in carrying out a purpose, but then not reveal our role to us.<sup>40</sup> This would be like a person creating a business and hiring workers, but then failing to tell them the mission of the business and their role. It is the stuff of comedy to imagine these workers being bored to tears, while the business owner sobs loudly after learning that the business is losing money. Of course, no competent owner of a business would fail to tell the workers what they were hired “to do” because failing to provide this essential information would be *self-defeating*.

To sum up this section, the universe provides human life with a context of meaning by having given rise to intelligent life, by unknowingly sustaining us, and by containing intrinsically valuable goods. By engaging with these goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives and to humanity. This outcome occurs regardless of whether the universe and humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent context of meaning. Not only is a transcendent purpose unnecessary for our lives to be meaningful, the one envisioned by Tartaglia would be degrading.

In response, Tartaglia will likely argue that I have not addressed the questions about “meaning of life,” but have only shown that our individual lives can be meaningful - something he does not dispute. Tartaglia wants us to focus on the question “What is the meaning of life?” where “life” refers to “humanity.” But to know whether humanity is, or can be, meaningful, we *must first* answer the fundamental question of “What is humanity?” The answer to this question might seem obvious, which likely explains why the question has not been explored. However, as I hope to show in the next section, the answer to this question is not obvious, and is one of the keys for unlocking the mystery of whether human life

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<sup>38</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 169-184.

<sup>40</sup> I provide a more detailed version of this argument in Trisel (2012a).



is, or can be, meaningful.

#### 4. What is Humanity? – Holism versus Individualism

Bertrand Russell made a distinction between a class *as a whole* and a class *as many*. For example, we can think of a navy as a whole or as many sailors, as he indicated.<sup>41</sup> As I will argue, we can also think of “humanity” as one or many. More specifically, Tartaglia (and most other people I suspect) thinks of humanity *as a whole* - a perspective I will refer to as *holism*. We can also conceive of humanity as the *many, individual human beings* that make up the whole – a perspective I will refer to as *individualism*.

Before exploring the question “What is humanity?” it will be helpful to start with a discussion of a group that is easier to understand – the New York Yankees (hereafter “Yankees”). If we imagine we are watching a Yankees baseball game, we see the individual players, bats, and ball. It is uncontroversial that these concrete objects exist. But does the Yankees, *as a group*, also exist?<sup>42</sup> Some proponents of *ontological individualism* deny that groups exist.<sup>43</sup> Thus, they will deny that the Yankees, as a group, won the World Series in 2009.

Many philosophers believe in the reality of groups. Even if we assume that the Yankees, *as a group*, exist, there are two different ways of explaining their achievement of winning the World Series. *Methodological holists* will argue that this group achievement was *more than* the sum of the achievements by the individual players because of the synergistic effects of the players working together. In contrast, proponents of *methodological individualism* will maintain that this achievement was nothing more than the sum of the individual achievements.

Individuals can have rights, be blameworthy or praiseworthy, and be bearers of meaning. Can *groups* do the same? There has been extensive analysis of whether groups can have rights and be blameworthy, but there has been very little discussion about whether groups can be praiseworthy and meaningful.

Do human beings constitute a group? If so, what type of group is it? Katherine

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<sup>41</sup> Russell (1903), p. 68. Ritchie (2013, p. 258) makes the case that a group, like a class, can be thought of as one or many.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion, see Ritchie (2013) .

<sup>43</sup> Other proponents of ontological individualism acknowledge that groups exist, but maintain that groups and other social phenomena are exhaustively determined by properties or facts about individuals.

Ritchie outlines various criteria for determining what qualifies as a “social group.”<sup>44</sup> Some of these criteria include that a social group can be located in space and time and have different members at different times. Because other objects, such as trees, also meet most of the criteria she specifies, Ritchie adds the requirement that the members *intended* to form the group. In a later article, Ritchie distinguishes between “organized” and “unorganized” social groups. Whereas the members of organized social groups, such as committees, need to cooperate to achieve the goal(s) of the group, the members of unorganized social groups, such as racial and gender groups, “do not need to intend to cooperate or act in concord with other members of the group.”<sup>45</sup>

One might try to argue that all human beings have shared intentions and, therefore, qualify as an “organized social group.” This argument, however, would be a stretch. Unlike the members of organized social groups, not all human beings have a shared goal. Indeed, some people have conflicting goals.

It seems plausible that human beings constitute an “unorganized social group.” Another option would be to conceive of human beings in the same way as biologists - as a species. But this might not get us very far in understanding the ontology of humanity because it leads to another, unresolved question: “What is a species and how do you distinguish one species from another?”<sup>46</sup> Because there is vigorous debate about the ontological status of social groups and species, more work will be needed to determine whether human beings make up a group and, if so, what type of group it is. I raise these questions about the ontology of humanity, and hope others will join me in exploring them, because addressing these questions is necessary for understanding whether it makes sense to think that humanity could be meaningful. In what follows, I will assume that human beings are an “unorganized social group” and that such a group can be a bearer of meaning.

Targalia thinks of a meaning of life as a meaning that is *possessed* by humanity, *as a whole*.<sup>47</sup> If we think of “humanity,” not in the traditional holistic way, but as the *many individuals* that comprise the group, it reveals a different way that humanity could become meaningful. As I will argue, when *individuals* accrue meaning in their lives, by, for example, making intellectual or moral

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<sup>44</sup> Ritchie (2013), pp. 258-260.

<sup>45</sup> Ritchie (2015), pp. 313-314.

<sup>46</sup> For further discussion about this question, see Ereshefsky (2016).

<sup>47</sup> Targalia (2016a), p. 54.

achievements, this also adds meaning to humanity. As more individual lives become meaningful, there is a corresponding increase in the meaning of human life. Irving Singer made a few comments suggesting that he also believed that humanity could become meaningful through the efforts of individual human beings. He writes: “To the extent that life becomes meaningful in this accumulative way, its total meaning is increased.”<sup>48</sup> The two perspectives of how humanity could be meaningful are as follows.

*Meaning of Life – Holism:* A meaning of life is a meaning *possessed* by humanity, *as a group*, rather than by individual human beings.

*Meaning of Life – Individualism:* A meaning of life is a meaning that humanity *accrues* as individual human beings engage with intrinsically valuable goods. This meaning is *equal to* the sum of the meaning in the lives of individual human beings.

There could be holistic or individualistic versions of supernaturalism<sup>49</sup> and naturalism. For example, with the traditional view of *supernaturalistic holism* (as I will call it), God assigns the *same* purpose(s) to *everyone*. In contrast, Jacob Affolter suggests that God could assign each person a unique purpose.<sup>50</sup> He does not argue that these unique purposes need to be related. Affolter’s view exemplifies *supernaturalistic individualism*.

In the next section, I will seek to support a naturalistic and individualistic account of meaning of life, which I will call “*naturalistic individualism*.” Before doing so, I will point out some problems that arise with Tartaglia’s version of supernaturalistic holism. According to Tartaglia, “if you ask about the meaning of life, the answer will apply to everybody . . . .”<sup>51</sup> When thinking about whether humanity was created for a purpose, we must keep in mind that “humanity” is not something that exists independently of human beings. Rather, humanity is comprised of individual human beings. Furthermore, the members of humanity are not static, but change over time, as new human beings are born and existing human beings die. With this in mind, suppose that a transcendent being created

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<sup>48</sup> Singer (1996), p. 42. See also pp. 44-45.

<sup>49</sup> For more discussion about supernaturalism, see Metz (2013), pp. 77-118.

<sup>50</sup> Affolter (2007), p. 453.

<sup>51</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 93. See also (2016a), p. 7.

the universe and wanted to see if intelligent life could be created from matter. The transcendent being successfully created the first two human beings – a man and a woman. Let us also suppose that these two individuals were not created to “do something” and that the transcendent being was indifferent to whether they had children. These two individuals lived for 60 years and had many children who, in turn, had additional offspring. After 200,000 years, humanity consisted of seven billion people, let us suppose. To state it formally:

At  $t_1$ , humanity was comprised of two members who were created for a purpose by a transcendent being.

At  $t_{200,000}$ , humanity was comprised of seven billion members who were not created for a purpose by a transcendent being.

Tartaglia claims that whether human life is meaningful will apply to “everybody,” but in the above scenario, where only the first two members of humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent being, it is unclear that this is true. Is humanity, *as a whole*, meaningful or meaningless in this scenario? It would be helpful if Tartaglia would let us know the answer to this question.

In the following different scenario, suppose that a transcendent being created *all* human beings to “do something.” Suppose also that this transcendent being made our role clear to us, but that only 20% of people contributed toward implementing the purpose. The remaining 80% of human beings disregarded the purpose and spent all their time watching television. In this scenario, where only 20% of people contribute, is humanity meaningful or meaningless? If humanity is meaningless, what level of participation by human beings would be required for humanity to be meaningful? Would 51% of human beings have to contribute to the purpose or would the percentage have to be 80% or 100%? *Where do you draw the line* and how do you defend, *in a non-arbitrary way*, where it is drawn?

At first, the holistic account might seem appealing because of its simplicity at conceiving of human life, as a whole, as either *possessing* or *lacking* meaning. However, as shown by the preceding thought experiment, this simplicity quickly disappears as we think more deeply about what humanity is and how human beings, with our freedom and diverse interests, would carry out an assigned purpose. Tartaglia might respond that the above situation would not happen because human beings would be unable to disengage from the purpose (in the

scenario he envisions). But if our actions are predetermined, or everyone is forced to implement this purpose, it then becomes difficult to see how this would confer meaning on humanity.

## 5. Researching Meaning of Life from the Bottom-up

In discussing “What is philosophy?” Tartaglia contends that philosophy was originally motivated by questions of ontology and enframing; “we wanted to know what exists and why it exists.”<sup>52</sup> He uses the word “enframing” to mean being situated within a context of meaning. In recounting the history of philosophy, Tartaglia argues that to determine whether there is a meaning of life, “a natural place to start is with the ontological question of whether there are any gods to provide a wider framework within which human life exists.”<sup>53</sup>

This “top-down” approach, as I will call it, to researching questions about meaning of life has proven to be unsuccessful. For thousands of years, there has been speculation and discussion about gods and transcendence, yet human beings have made little progress in understanding the questions about meaning of life. Instead of continuing the top-down approach to researching the topic of meaning of life, we would be better served with a new, *bottom-up* approach.

From the perspective of naturalistic individualism, the *source of life’s meaning* is not a supernatural being, but the interaction between individual human beings and intrinsically valuable, natural goods. By explaining what gives meaning to the life of a person, the philosophical and psychological research that has been conducted during the last thirty years provides a good starting point for a bottom-up approach to researching meaning of life. Besides continuing this research on “meaning in life,” an additional necessary step for a bottom-up approach would be to determine whether the meaning that we accrue in our individual lives can serve as a foundation for making humanity meaningful, as I hypothesize.

With naturalistic individualism, the extent to which humanity is meaningful equals the sum of the meaning in the lives of individual human beings. For this proposed account to be plausible, (1) meaning must be *measurable*; (2) meaning must be *comparable* among individuals; (3) human beings must constitute a *group*; and (4) this type of group must be capable of being a *bearer of meaning*.

If meaning cannot be measured, then of course it cannot be aggregated. If

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<sup>52</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), p. 71.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

meaning is measurable, but not comparable among individuals, then it could be aggregated, but the aggregate number would be unintelligible - it would be like adding apples and oranges. Finally, if meaning is measurable and comparable, but human beings do not make up a group, or are a group but this group is not a bearer of meaning, then the aggregate number would not represent the extent to which humanity is meaningful. Rather, it would simply be the sum of the meaning in our individual lives. Similarly, if there are no “nations” in this world, but only persons, it would be inappropriate to conclude that the sum of the wealth of persons in a particular geographic area reflects the wealth of a given “nation.”

There is debate about which metric(s) we should use to assess the quality of our lives. Recently, researchers have begun to measure “subjective well-being” in addition to, or sometimes instead of, happiness. For example, although the *World Happiness Report* contains happiness in the title, it is a report about “subjective well-being,” as the report acknowledges. The report compares the degree of subjective well-being by country.<sup>54</sup> In this study, the primary question to measure well-being is as follows. Imagine a ladder with 10 possible steps, with the bottom step representing the worst possible life for you and the top step representing the best possible life for you. “On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”<sup>55</sup>

The data source for this “life ladder” question is the Gallup World Poll. Gallup conducts this poll in more than 160 countries that include 99% of the world’s adult population. They select a representative sample of about 1,000 individuals from each country so that the results will be generalizable to the various countries.

Amitai Etzioni argues that happiness and subjective well-being are inferior measures because they fail to take into account whether people are living up to their moral responsibilities.<sup>56</sup> In response, Metz makes the case that meaningfulness should be included as one of the metrics for appraising a society because it is not reducible to happiness or morality.<sup>57</sup> But is meaningfulness something that we can measure and compare?

To reflect on the preceding question, it might be helpful to list the different aspects that are involved in measuring subjective well-being, as I will do in the

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<sup>54</sup> See Helliwell (2015), p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> A discussion of the survey methodology can be found in the “Statistical Appendix” at <<http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2015/>> or at <<http://www.gallup.com/178667/gallup-world-poll-work.aspx>>.

<sup>56</sup> Etzioni (2016).

<sup>57</sup> Metz (2016b).

table below, and then to think about these aspects as they relate to meaningfulness. First, we can ask, “Who is being evaluated?” With the Gallup World Poll, those being evaluated include the respondents to the survey and each country. Although Gallup conducts the interviews, the respondents *rate their own* subjective well-being. Thus, these are internal or self-evaluations of well-being, rather than an external evaluation of the participants in the study.<sup>58</sup> If Gallup were to ask the question, “Is your life going well?” this question would have only two possible answers: “yes” and “no.” It would be a binary variable. Rather, their “life ladder” question reflects the assumption that there are degrees of well-being. Thus, they treat well-being as an ordinal variable.

<b>Aspects of Measuring Subjective Well-Being</b>	
Who is Being Evaluated?	Individual Respondents to the Survey and the Countries in Which They Reside
Who Performs the Evaluation?	Self-Evaluation
Type of Measure	Subjective
Is the Measure Binary or Ordinal?	“Life ladder” question is ordinal

Measuring meaningfulness is more controversial than measuring happiness or subjective well-being. There is debate about what meaning is, whether it is objective or subjective, and whether meaning is something that is present or absent or whether there are degrees of meaningfulness. There is also debate about how meaningfulness should be measured, namely whether it should be measured internally or externally.

Metz, with his “fundamentality theory,” hypothesizes that one’s life is more meaningful, the more that one orients one’s rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence.<sup>59</sup> Some critics of this theory, including Masahiro Morioka, deny that there are degrees of meaningfulness and that it is possible to make interpersonal comparisons of meaning. Morioka has proposed an internalist account of meaning in life. He argues that the question about meaning in life is often asked in the following way, “does my life like this have any meaning at

<sup>58</sup> See Helliwell (2015, pp. 17-20) for discussion about why they measure well-being internally rather than externally.

<sup>59</sup> Metz (2013).

all?”<sup>60</sup> He contends that this question has only two possible responses (“yes” and “no”) and can be answered only by the person who asks the question.

Even if meaning is binary and not objective, it would still be possible to make some interpersonal comparisons of meaningfulness. For example, one could calculate the number and percent of people living in a country *who self-report* that their lives are meaningful. However, because these individuals might have different conceptions of “meaningfulness,” these results would be less useful, from a policymaking perspective, than they would be if meaning were objective.

If we knew whether meaning was objective (as I believe) or subjective, it would help to determine how we should measure meaningfulness. For example, if meaning is purely subjective, then the person being evaluated would be in the best position to know whether his or her life is meaningful. Alternatively, if meaning is objective, then one could be mistaken about whether one’s life is meaningful. Consequently, this would lend support to those philosophers who think meaningfulness should be measured using mind-independent, external standards.

Tartaglia argues that there are four different notions of “meaning” and that meaningfulness is culturally specific.<sup>61</sup> Unless there is a way of resolving these disputes about the nature of “meaning,” this will pose a serious threat to the prospect of measuring meaningfulness. Because we are at an early stage of analyzing what it means to say that a person’s life is meaningful, I remain hopeful that we will be able to work through these issues.

If it turns out that meaning is objective, measurable, and comparable among individuals, then it would be possible to aggregate this meaning and to have confidence that the aggregate number is intelligible. Moreover, if human beings constitute an “unorganized social group,” and this type of group can be a bearer of meaning, then the sum of the meaning in our individual lives would represent the extent to which humanity is meaningful.

One way that critics will challenge these claims is by attempting to raise doubt that an “unorganized social group” could be meaningful. That human beings constitute an unorganized social group does not mean there is no cooperation among human beings. Rather, it only means that *not all members* of humanity have a shared goal. However, *many* human beings do have shared goals, such as the teams of scientists who are researching a cure for cancer. Let us compare two

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<sup>60</sup> Morioka (2015), p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Tartaglia (2015), pp. 103-106. See also Tartaglia (2016a), p. 14.



scenarios. The first scenario reflects the current state of our lives. The second scenario reflects our current lives with the following changes: human beings have discovered how life originated, have attained an understanding of how consciousness arises in human beings, and have recently discovered a cure for all types of cancer. Even if human beings are an “unorganized social group,” it seems to make sense to say that humanity is more meaningful in the second scenario than in the first.

I suspect that Tartaglia will be unconvinced that accruing meaning in our individual lives can provide a foundation for making humanity meaningful. He will likely maintain that humanity is meaningless no matter what we do in our lives. Tartaglia’s claim that humanity is meaningless is based on the hidden assumption that human beings make up a group and that this group *had the potential* to be meaningful (if it had been created for a purpose by a transcendent being). If human beings do not make up a group that has the potential to be meaningful, then claiming that “humanity” is “meaningful” or “meaningless” would be *nonsensical*. Furthermore, under these conditions, it would be irrational for anyone to worry that “humanity” is meaningless.

Let us now return to discussing naturalistic individualism. I will conclude this section by responding to a potential, different criticism of this proposed account of meaning of life. One might argue that this account implies that we *should maximize* the meaning of human life. This account leads, a critic will argue, to the counterintuitive conclusion that we should create billions upon billions of future people, even if their lives would only have a tiny amount of meaning in them. Because the meaning of human life is an aggregation of the meaning in the lives of human beings, creating vast numbers of new human beings would make humanity much more meaningful than it currently is. However, this conclusion is *repugnant* because the lives of these new persons might only have a negligible amount of meaning in them.<sup>62</sup>

The universe, as a context of meaning, unknowingly supports our desire to lead meaningful lives, but this support will collapse if we create too many people.

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<sup>62</sup> See Parfit (1984) for the original formulation of the “Repugnant Conclusion.” He begins by stating the “Impersonal Average Principle,” which is, “If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which people’s lives go, on average, best” (p. 386). He then considers a Hedonistic and a non-Hedonistic version of this principle. He expresses the non-Hedonistic version in terms of maximizing “the quality of lives.” In contrast, I discuss maximizing the meaning in our lives. The concept of a “quality life” is more encompassing than that of a “meaningful life,” and takes into account a number of factors including the amount of meaning and happiness in that life.

Creating vast numbers of new people might make humanity more meaningful *in the short run*, but it would have counterproductive and devastating long-term consequences. It would deplete and overwhelm the biosphere and likely result in the extinction of humanity and many other forms of life. Thus, if we were to pursue the goal of maximizing the meaning of human life, it would need to be balanced against the goal of preserving the biosphere.

There is an alternative, better way of making humanity more meaningful that does not involve creating vast numbers of future people. By supporting and encouraging *existing* human beings to engage with intrinsically valuable goods, it can help them to realize their potential and lead meaningful lives, which in turn will enhance the meaning of human life.

## 6. Conclusion

Because the topic of “meaning *of* life,” in recent years, has been overshadowed by discussion about “meaning *in* life,” I found it refreshing to read Tartaglia’s works. I disagree, however, with his top-down and narrow approach for researching the topic of meaning of life and with his conclusion that human life is meaningless. Like Tartaglia, I do not think that life was created for a purpose. However, lacking an assigned purpose would not necessarily render human life meaningless because there is at least one other way that human life could become meaningful.

I have pointed out two conceptions of humanity, one that focuses on the group, as a whole, and one that focuses on the “many human beings” that comprise the group. By conceiving of humanity in the individualistic way, and combining this individualism with objective naturalism, it reveals a pathway by which humanity could become meaningful. It is through the *efforts of individuals* that a sports team, university, nation, or other group is successful. Similarly, it is through the efforts of individuals that humanity could become meaningful.

Finally, I have responded to Tartaglia’s claim that the research on “meaning in life” is trivial by explaining how this research is related to understanding how humanity could become meaningful. This research is important not only for explaining what gives meaning to the life of a person, but for the larger reason of explaining what we, as individuals, can do to make humanity meaningful.

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## Reply to Brooke Alan Trisel

James Tartaglia\*

Brooke Alan Trisel is an advocate of the ‘meaning *in* life’ research programme and his paper lays out, with admirable clarity and passion, exactly why he thinks it is important. Trisel is very unusual among these figures, however, for he neither conflates ‘meaning *in* life’ with ‘the meaning *of* life’, nor dismissively puts the latter to one side. Rather, he thinks that an account of meaning *in* life might provide an answer to the question of the meaning *of* life. He is not sure, however; he thinks it might, but that more work is needed to find out whether it actually can. The idea that it would provide the answer is simple enough: through individual people doing meaningful things (building up their meaning *in* life), the meaning aggregates, thereby making human life as a whole meaningful (providing us with the meaning *of* life). The problem is that he is not sure whether the meaning can aggregate in such a way as to answer the big question, because he is not sure that humanity can constitute a group; although he is sympathetic to the view that humanity counts as an ‘unorganized social group’. Nevertheless, despite these sympathies, he cautiously concedes that if ‘human beings do not make up a group that has the potential to be meaningful, then claiming that “humanity” is “meaningful” or “meaningless” would be *nonsensical*’ (p. 176). So there are only two viable answers to the question of the meaning of life, on Trisel’s view: either the question makes no sense (if humanity is not a group), or the meaning of life is the aggregate of the meanings of individual lives.

Nihilism is a non-starter, on Trisel’s view, given the existence of social meaning. But what about the religious answer that life is provided with meaning by a transcendent context? Suppose there is such a context, and suppose also that humanity constitutes a group. In that case, we would have two competing answers to the question of the meaning of life. This suggests to me that Trisel has invented a new question. Here are some indicators of this. Firstly, on his view, the question may not make sense, depending on how work on the metaphysics of groups turns out. But it evidently does make some kind of sense, given that so many people

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have asked it; even if we assume that philosophers will one day determine the definitive truth about groups, which I would not, the result of this would not be the abandonment of the question as senseless, but rather a reinterpretation of the question which captured its sense. Another indicator is that nihilism is not even possible on his view, given the manifest situation we all find ourselves in. And yet in full awareness of that situation, many sensible people have worried about, and even endorsed, nihilism. How can they have failed to notice that our actions have meaning for others and for ourselves? The indicator I began with is clearest, however, for suppose the transcendent meaning were revealed to us in some epistemically indisputable fashion: God simultaneously interrupts everybody's consciousness to reveal a mind-blowing answer which makes perfect sense. I doubt anybody – Trisel included – would say: 'No, that's not the meaning of life! Analytic philosophy already answered that one. You're answering a different question.' What would that 'different question' be, exactly?

What God would have to tell us is the reason there is a reality; a reality that includes both humans and God, of course. In light of this reason, he might have to tell us not only the meaning of human life, but of his own life too – if this had any bearing on the meaning of our lives, as it presumably would. As I stressed from the outset in *Meaningless*, any answer to the question of the meaning of life must address this existential issue. Otherwise, it would not be true to the intentions of this perfectly natural question, and so would not answer it. Nevertheless Trisel proceeds to claim that there can be a meaning of life within a physical universe that emerged, meaninglessly, from the Big Bang. He accepts that there is no meaningful reason for human life, of the kind that only a transcendent context could provide. But in that case, the only answer available to him, if he wants to stick with the question, is nihilism. Despite his best intentions, however, he does not stick with the question, but rather uses the meaning *in* life idea to invent a new one: the question of what aggregate of social meaning our lives collectively produce. Imagine announcing to the world: 'the meaning of life is that our knowledge, loving relationships, etc., give us a collective score of X meaning-points'; the world would respond, 'that doesn't tell us why we're here ... and what's the point of doing all of that stuff anyway?'

This switch reveals Trisel's real interest in 'the meaning of life', which like the rest of the meaning *in* life advocates, I think, is not metaphysics but rather normative ethics. It provides them with an evocative and hence powerful platform from which to theorise about how we ought to live our lives; just as religious

answers to the original question continue to provide that kind of platform. Since I think this muddies the waters, I would rather they restricted themselves to theorising directly, in their naturalistic fashion, about what we ought to do in order to live the good life; which is all I think they are really doing. There are also foundational theoretical flaws to the idea of attaching this label to normative theorising, as I argue in the book; much too harshly, I admit (see the introduction to this symposium). But the arguments are there and Trisel does not engage with any of them. Instead, he goes on the offensive by trying to show that I have my own foundational problems; a venerable tactic with a good track-record, of course. So let me turn to those arguments.

The immediate problem I face is that the position Trisel addresses is not my own; if this were an issue of fine-grained interpretation then I would simply gloss over it. But he says,

Tartaglia argues that humanity was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless. He assumes that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. (p. 160; see also p. 162)

I said that our having a purpose is just a ‘tantalizing possibility’ (PML, p. 2) which accounts for much of the human interest in the question, and that as such, ‘the only options capable of resolving the issue of its own terms are that reality exists for a reason (*which either does or does not attribute purpose to human life*), or that reality does not exist for a reason’ (PML, p. 3; italics added to the original). Trisel even quotes me saying that, ‘the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable [i.e. rather than having the capacity to achieve some purpose]’ (p. 162 / PML, p. 2). So surely he must have known that my view is that life could be meaningful even if we have no purpose, and hence that I did not argue as he says I do. As his title says, human life could be unintended but meaningful; I agree.

This threatens to make my task of responding less interesting than it might have been. Thus when Trisel says I use ‘the phrase “context of meaning” in an *overly narrow* way, to mean a context that has a purpose’ (p. 164), this is simply incorrect. Likewise, when he suggests that my transcendent context of meaning must really be God, since to give the universe a purpose it must be able to ‘think, plan, and have a goal(s)’ (p. 163). But rather than pedantically go through the paper in this fashion, let me skip to the main argument.

The argument is as follows. Suppose God created the physical universe, and then made Adam and Eve for the purpose of discovering whether he could make intelligent life from matter. There are now seven billion people because of this initial act, but God has no purpose for any of us; we are an epiphenomenon of his experiment. So, 'Is humanity, *as a whole*, meaningful or meaningless in this scenario?' (p. 171). Then in a variation, Trisel supposes that God makes humanity for a purpose, but only 20% of people pay heed to it. Would humanity then be meaningful? And if not, what percentage of triers would be required?

The answer is that it depends on whether there is a transcendent context of meaning in which God and the physical universe exists, and if so, what its nature is. If there is one, then if that context attributes meaning to humanity as a whole, then humanity is meaningful. If that context attributes meaning to just one person, or perhaps just their finger, then that person, or just their finger, is meaningful. If that context does not attribute meaning to humanity as a whole, then either humanity as a whole, or just the people (or body-parts) it misses out, would be meaningless. But if there is no context of meaning, then we have a much simpler answer: humanity as a whole is meaningless. Now you might be inclined to object that the context could not make just one person meaningful, and especially not just one person's finger, because their existence would be implicated with others: the meaning of their ancestors would be to give rise to the meaningful people, for instance. To react in this way, however, would demonstrate a 'failure to grasp the enormity of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning' (PML, p. 52), as I put it. For if the physical universe really does exist within a wider context of meaning, we really have no idea what is going on: the kind of reasoning employed in the objection, which works in the objective world, goes straight out of the window. That is why I describe such hypotheses as idle possibilities. My nihilism, by contrast, takes it for granted that our notions of a meaningful reality will not apply to the transcendent context; and if reality is not meaningful, then it is meaningless, just as objective thought suggests it is.

Trisel's objection takes it that I am thinking of God making people for a purpose, which would be a highly specific hypothesis about transcendent reality, of the kind our cultural history primes us for. Within these strictures, he supposes that God's purpose for Adam and Eve would make their lives meaningful. But that would depend on whether God's existence was meaningful; and if it was, whether the meaningful context that made him meaningful also made his purpose for Adam and Eve meaningful. But perhaps the idea is that God actually *is* the



transcendent context; he provides his own self-explanatory context, rather as for physicalists, the physical universe provides its own meaningless context. I think this is what Trisel has in mind. Well in that case, monistic pantheism would be true: God would be reality. What one of 'his purposes' could be, in that case, I really have no idea; but luckily my view that positive transcendent hypotheses of meaning are baseless exempts me from having to speculate. However, if his purposes are required to make us meaningful, then I myself would not say that humanity as a whole is meaningful unless we are not all covered; if one person is missed out then it is simply the vast majority of human life that is meaningful. But to be honest, had I not decided to play ball, I could have quite legitimately responded from the outset that Trisel's questions are for the theologians. All I claim is that if reality is transcendent, then human life could be meaningful; the meaningful context *could* implicate everyone, so humanity, construed as either a group or a collection of individuals, *could* be meaningful. Questions about what to say if it does not implicate everyone, what bearing God's purposes play, etc., are simply not for me; given that I do not think there is any such context.

Another issue for the theologians that Trisel presents me with concerns whether a meaningful life would be 'degrading' and lacking in free will (pp. 165-6). This is because I said that if we live in a meaningful context, then our actions would have their meaning bestowed by this context whether we liked it or not. But Trisel himself thinks there are intrinsically meaningful activities; he has not realised that this places him in exactly the same boat. If we enter into a loving relationship, on his view, this will be meaningful whether we like it or not. Does that make such relationships degrading, and does it follow that we cannot enter into them freely? These are not questions for me, but personally I do not feel degraded by my lack of choice over the objective interpretations that hold true of me, such as those concerning my age and eye-colour; if Trisel or the religious philosophers are right, then the meaning of all our actions would figure among these. If this worries him, then perhaps he should reconsider his commitment to moral objectivism.

The distinction between holism and individualism about groups has no relevance to my position, because if there is no transcendent context of meaning, human life is meaningless however you construe it. Moreover, Trisel is mistaken in thinking that my holistic approach neglects the individualist question, because as I make plain in the book, if human life is meaningless, then every individual person's life is too. He says that this top-down approach has made no progress (p.

172), but I deny this. This sounds to me like frustration at our inability to discover the meaning of life: only one answer is deemed acceptable, because of the false assumption that nihilism is bad. Trisel pigeon-holes me with the religious thinkers on this issue, but all I said is that they have the question right; unlike naturalists who transform it into something they can answer positively, because the influence of religion makes them think that nihilism is bad. He thinks I am ‘disappointed’ that we lack a purpose and that I ‘lament’ nihilism (p.166). But for what it is worth, he has me all wrong: I was actually quite excited when I first started taking nihilism seriously as a substantive metaphysical claim.

At the end of his paper, we see the kind of issue that really concerns Trisel: issues such as population explosion and the effects this has on the environment. Extremely important, I entirely agree. He wants to use his views on meaning in life to address them, but as immediately becomes clear, this make matters worse. For if meaning in life is an objective commodity, it makes sense to maximise it by increasing the population; but Trisel, like me, does not want the environment to be ruined. So he argues that if there were too many people, life would be so bad that total meaning would decrease. He will never be able to do those sums, however. If he were to forget about meaning in life and argue directly for sustainable development, he would have one less problem to worry about. A related problem with objectivising meaning as a route to normative ethical theorising which I have highlighted (Tartaglia 2016), is that since various different senses of a ‘meaningful life’ have widespread currency, promoting this notion could exacerbate a phenomenon we are already witnessing, in which people try to make their life objectively meaningful by doing morally reprehensible, but nevertheless significant or subjectively engaging, things. If the meaning in life advocates were arguing against these other senses, then I would obviously not object; but it seems to me that they simply presuppose a moral component, and that the moral sense they want to promote over others is on the weakest theoretical ground if we are talking about something objective. I think that if meaning in life advocates want us to value knowledge, art and charity, then they should argue directly for why we should value these things, and give up on the meaning in life agenda, which encourages them to simply take these things for granted by *starting* with the intuition that, ‘obviously, these things add meaning to life’.

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## Transcendence

J. J. Valberg\*

### Abstract

James Tartaglia in his book *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* advances what he calls ‘The Transcendent Hypothesis’ as a solution to the problem of consciousness. The present paper examines T’s solution in light of his definition of ‘transcendence’, offers several criticisms of the solution, and briefly, indicates a conception of consciousness on which the problem does not arise.

### 1.

James Tartaglia’s *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* is a book wide in scope and bristling with ideas. We shall mainly focus on just one, viz., his application of the concept of transcendence to the problem of consciousness. The problem, as he presents it, should be familiar to philosophers; his proposal for solving it, however, is novel (at least I have never encountered it before).

The problem, very roughly, might be stated as follows: whereas the existence of consciousness (or experience) cannot be denied, it is not obvious what exactly consciousness is.

Thus, as T explains, identifying it with something going on in the brain or anywhere else in the natural world (which T often refers to as ‘objective reality’) – a view to which many contemporary philosophers have subscribed – seems, at least in some respects, to clash with our everyday conception of consciousness, and in that sense to be what T calls a ‘revisionist’ view of the matter. Thus, e.g., things might be arranged so that you could catch a glimpse of what is going on in your brain right now. Does it seem right that the activity (in that pulpy, convoluted mass) of which you are, via a mirror, say, visually aware might be your consciousness? You can point to the activity. Can you point to your consciousness?

But if it is not something going on in your brain, what *else* might your consciousness be? Traditionally, some philosophers have appealed to a view of reality as including not just what T calls objective reality (the natural world) but

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a discrete, further reality, which is essentially spaceless and hence radically different from objective reality (the Cartesian soul). Yet this raises the awkward question of how, in that case, our consciousness might, as it certainly seems to, arise causally out of – and in turn may cause – events which belong to the physiological make-up of the human beings we are and thus are part of objective reality; not to speak of the fact that the idea of such a further reality seems foreign to any conception of reality which respects modern science.

## 2.

Such, then, is the problem of consciousness. We cannot deny the existence of consciousness or experience; yet there seems to be nothing which it might be. There have been, since Descartes, countless suggestions for solving the problem. T's solution turns around the concept of transcendence.

T's solution, if I understand it correctly, is very simple. Consciousness, whatever exactly it is, is a kind of activity or state or event – that is, a kind of phenomenon – that occurs on the part of (let us suppose) a human subject. The problem, once again, is that consciousness cannot be identified with any phenomenon that is part either of objective reality or a supposed (spaceless) addendum to this reality; hence, while it is undeniable that there is such a thing as consciousness, there seems to be nothing that it might be. T's solution (he calls it the 'Transcendent Hypothesis') is that, in trying to locate consciousness either, on the one hand, in objective reality or, on the other, in the Cartesian addendum to this, we overlook the further possibility that it might be part of what T describes as a 'transcendent' reality – which, he maintains, is where consciousness should be located (PML, p. 104).

## 3.

Of course, everything hangs on what is meant here by 'transcendent reality'. What, e.g., is the difference between the reality that is objective and that which is transcendent? If we assume the former is that of which we are perceptually aware and which spreads out (endlessly) around us now in space and time, then what might the latter be?

T distinguishes two senses of 'transcendent'. On the first, one reality transcends another for the simple reason that it is a different reality (or perhaps

we should say, kind of reality) from the other. On this sense, however, the Cartesian addendum would ‘transcend’ the objective world. So far from solving the problem of consciousness, this is part of the picture which gives rise to the problem.

On the second sense, the fact that one reality transcends another – this would be at least a necessary versus sufficient condition – entails that entities belonging to these realities, though spatio-temporal, have no spatial or temporal relation to each other. Thus, no matter how long and in what direction I travel away from the point I currently occupy, I could never get ‘closer to’ or ‘further from’ an entity that belongs to a transcendent reality (Valberg 2007).

Now, although T does not explicitly characterize transcendence in this way, it seems to capture what he has in mind. Thus he says that the ‘only concrete model of transcendence we have ... [is one in which entities in the transcending reality] stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to [the world of] a dream’ (PML, p. 103). There are, in fact, aspects of T’s view of the dream/reality contrast to which I would take exception; but these do not affect our present discussion. Let us therefore agree to take this contrast as our model for understanding transcendence.

According to T, the key to solving the problem of consciousness lies in what he calls the ‘Transcendent Hypothesis (TH)’. The TH says that, e.g., my present consciousness belongs neither to objective reality nor its Cartesian addendum, but to a transcendent reality: a reality that stands to the objective world (the reality I take to include both myself and the objects spreading out endlessly around me) in the way that, if this were a dream, the objects and phenomena belonging to the reality outside the dream would transcend the world that spreads out around me.

The TH, if correct, seems to solve the problem of consciousness. But problems, or questions, arise. We shall mention three.

#### 4.

If consciousness belongs neither to objective reality nor its Cartesian addendum, we are, as T maintains, required neither to accept the kind of revisionism that identifies consciousness with phenomena in the brain nor to grapple with the supposed conundrum of how consciousness and these phenomena might causally interact. Indeed, if consciousness belongs to a transcendent reality, there is – there *can be* – no question of any such identification

or interaction.

But is it not a well-known fact, a commonplace, that what transpires in the brain affects how things are from within consciousness or experience – that, e.g., taking certain drugs (which act on the brain) may affect our perception of colour, that brain damage can radically alter the way objects appear?

The point is not lost on T. But he thinks that such commonplace beliefs are the result of a mistake, viz., of our misinterpreting consciousness or experience, which is a transcendent reality, as ‘both part of the objective world and a subjective entity, in order to interpret it as indirect awareness of an objective world (PML, p. 112).’ I am not sure I understand this, or, indeed, why we should have the aim of interpreting consciousness as an indirect awareness etc. Or, if it is not meant to be an ‘aim’, why suppose that we place such a convoluted and (no doubt) misguided construction on things when all we *seem* to be doing is – in our habitual inductivist way – ascribing a causal connection on the basis of an observed succession of phenomena (e.g., taking drugs and an alteration in the way objects look to us)? Of course, such everyday inductive leaps may prove ill-founded; but it seems implausible to suppose they involve the kind of philosophical misinterpretation contemplated by T.

## 5.

Another difficulty is this. On T’s view, my present consciousness (call it ‘C’) belongs to a transcendent reality – but I misinterpret C (as being both part of objective reality and subjective.) The difficulty is that, in order for me to misinterpret C, that is, to take it to have properties it does (or could) not have, I would first have to single out C referentially. Yet if C belongs to a transcendent reality, this is not possible. The possibility of misinterpreting an entity E presupposes a kind of referential contact with E that is necessarily absent in the case where E is a transcendent entity.

I can, unproblematically, refer to entities and phenomena in, say, my dream of last night. But then, although the world of which I am a part transcends the world of the dream, I have access in memory to the world of the dream. However, if this, right now, were a dream, I would not have access to the world that would presumably stand outside this. Do I have memories of it? Can I see or touch etc. entities in that transcendent reality? If this were a dream, the reality that transcends the dream would be, for me, nothing more than ‘something’ that exists

or is there – ‘something’ into which I might emerge.

In that case, it is not clear how I might, in thought, single out for reference the entities – the objects and phenomena – that comprise the supposedly transcendent reality. On the dream hypothesis, there would be such a reality, but the entities by which it is comprised would be, for me, outside referential reach. They would not be entities about which I might form either a correct or an incorrect interpretation.

## 6.

The last problem we shall mention concerns the role of the dream hypothesis in T’s argument. I may toy with the dream hypothesis, but in fact I believe this is not a dream: the world around me is the real world, not a dream world. T, I take it, would assert the same with respect to his own case. However, his conception of a transcendent reality requires (I hope I have him right here) that this is a dream.

Thus, as we noted earlier, he says our only model for understanding transcendence is one in which entities in the transcending reality stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to [the world of] a dream. So, if I am to take seriously the idea that my present consciousness belongs to a transcendent reality, I must assume that this is a dream. But, it seems, that is just what I cannot assume, since, once again, I believe this is reality.

This has an awkward consequence. On T’s view, my consciousness is part of transcendent reality. If (as I believe) this is not a dream, there is no transcendent reality. And my consciousness? It seems that, on T’s view, not only that it is part neither of objective reality or its Cartesian addendum, but that there is no such thing as my consciousness.

## 7.

Yet I agree with T’s basic negative point that consciousness is part neither of (what he calls) objective reality or its Cartesian addendum. I also agree that it is therefore a mistake to conceive of consciousness as some kind of phenomenon (state or process or activity etc.) occurring in our heads or souls. The alternative, I suggest, involves not that consciousness is transcendent, but that it is, as I might put it, horizontal.

The familiar debate in current philosophy about consciousness or experience assumes that it is something which occurs or goes on in us – that it is a



phenomenon – the main issue being whether it occurs in our brains (the more popular view) or in our souls (the view to be avoided). And there is no denying that we at least sometimes conceive of consciousness (experience) in this way. Thus, e.g., if you observe me looking at my hand, you might think that light rays reflected from my hand are striking my eyes and initiating a complex string of phenomena whose upshot is yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand.

But suppose you adopt toward my consciousness the first-person perspective, and consider how things are for me in looking at my hand. I think: ‘Here is my hand, present within my consciousness (experience).’ In this case, it seems nonsense to regard the term ‘consciousness’ as referring to something that is going on in me, a phenomenon. (What would it be for my hand to be present in something going on in me?) Here, rather, ‘consciousness (experience)’ refers to *that from within which* my hand is present, not to a phenomenon but to a horizon.

OK. I have developed this idea at length elsewhere. Suffice it to say, the two conceptions of consciousness – as a phenomenon and as a horizon – are radically different. As we said, it is the phenomenal conception that philosophers assume when they argue about whether consciousness can be identified with phenomena in the brain. In this debate, the horizational conception of consciousness remains in the background. On the horizational conception, consciousness (experience) is part neither of the brain or the soul; it is neither material nor ethereal. It is in a sense nothing, that is, nothing in itself: nothing apart from there being something given or present from within it.

## 8.

T, as we noted, claims that our conception of consciousness or experience in terms of states (and more generally, phenomena), is the result of a confusion. This seems to me right – although, as I said (Section 4), I do not understand T’s diagnosis of the confusion.

As I see it, the confusion consists in running together our conception of consciousness as something which occurs in our heads, hence as a phenomenon of some kind, with that of the horizon from within which the world is present to us. On the horizational conception, consciousness, so far from being a phenomenon, is in a real sense nothing: it is nothing apart from something being given from within it; nothing, that is, in itself. The confused amalgamation of these two ideas

issues in the problematic conception of something which is both a phenomenon and yet somehow less than that – a shadowy or ethereal phenomenon.

There are, indeed, relevant phenomena on our part, viz., the events and processes, and so on, which occur in our brains and nervous systems. Consciousness does not consist of, but is caused by, such phenomena. Then what is consciousness – a further, shadowy phenomenon? Have we not omitted consciousness from our picture?

What has been omitted is not a phenomenon but a fact. When, say, I look at my hand, various things happen in the world, including the part of the world (the human being) that I am: light waves reflect from my hand to my eyes, the optic nerve is stimulated, impulses are transmitted to my brain, and so on. The upshot is not a further perhaps shadowy phenomenon but a fact, viz., the fact that my hand is there, visually present from within my consciousness.

Consciousness figures here not as something that occurs inside my head, hence as a phenomenon, but as the horizon within which the fact of presence holds. Suppose the fact in question were the fact, say, that a flash of lightning is present to me. The flash would be a phenomenon. However, the consciousness from within which the fact of the flash's presence holds would not be another phenomenon. Would there be *two* phenomena – one outside my head (the flash) and the other inside my head (my consciousness of the flash)? There would be just one, the flash, the fact of whose presence holds from within the horizon of my consciousness.

## 9.

Of course, as we said, there are things going on inside my head, viz., the events (phenomena) in my brain which are – or so we may suppose – responsible not just for whatever facts of presence hold from within my consciousness but for the fact that there is such a thing as my consciousness from within such facts hold. Thus each of us knows that when this activity ceases (which one day it will), then that will be it: there will be just nothing.

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## Reply to J. J. Valberg

James Tartaglia\*

Replying to a paper by J. J. Valberg is a very special milestone for me. When I was his student (door, left; bookcase, right; desk-JV-window, front), I frequently resisted what he was teaching me, only to consequently back down when he explained where I had gone wrong. The only thing he never got me to back down over was my advocacy of physicalism – and it turned out I was wrong about that too! Given this history, my current prospects do not look rosy. But this time I have an advantage: because Valberg has underestimated the degree to which his philosophy has influenced me. If he had realised how much I have internalised his teachings over the years – particularly from *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Valberg 2007), but also from everything else he has published or shown me – then I might have been in trouble. As it is, I think I will be OK. Seeing my position as viewed through Valberg's eyes, as this paper allows me to do, makes me highly suspicious of that position as a matter of instinct. But even with this heightened critical awareness, I am not seeing anything wrong with it; my exposition was inadequate, I have no doubt, but that is all I am seeing.

Central to Valberg's own position is his distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions of consciousness. As he explains in his paper, we think about consciousness with the phenomenal conception when we think of an experience as 'some kind of phenomenon (state or process or activity etc.) occurring in our heads or souls' (p. 191). Thus when I think about my current experience as a distinctive 'something', then I am thinking about consciousness *phenomenally*; as if it were a phenomenon in the world, which I could designate like any other phenomenon. I may go on to hold that this 'something' is produced by my brain; or can be identified with something in my brain; or is an element of immaterial reality that interacts with my brain; or is an illusionary intentional object; or is one of the building-blocks of a reality which physical descriptions cannot adequately characterise. But in all such cases, the difference pertains only to my metaphysical theory of the nature of what I am phenomenally conceiving.

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Valberg holds, as do I, that this is the conception routinely presupposed in philosophical debates about consciousness. The various sides all conceive of consciousness in this way, and then proceed to argue about the nature of what they are likewise conceiving; whether it is physical, non-physical, or illusory.

Valberg also holds, as do I (being his follower in this regard), that we have another, radically different conception of consciousness which ‘remains in the background’ of these debates (p. 192). This is the horzonal conception, according to which consciousness is *that within which* things appear to us: the horizon of subjective presentation. Thus we may distinguish between a tree and the presence of the tree within my consciousness; if I fall unconscious, the tree will still be there, but it will no longer be experientially present to me. Consciousness, on this conception, is the first-person horizon, or context, from within which certain facts hold, such as that the tree is present to me. It is not a phenomenon we can point to, but rather the horizon in which the phenomena we can point to are present. In itself, the horizon is nothing, but objects and events *appear* within it (as opposed to: simply *exist*). And when objects and events permanently cease to appear within somebody’s horizon, their conscious life is replaced by the nothingness of death.

Valberg thinks that the problem of consciousness, along with the standard responses to that problem – dualism, physicalist reductionism, eliminativism, etc. – arise from a failure to recognise the distinction between the phenomenal and horzonal conceptions. As he puts it, ‘the confusion consists in running together our conception of consciousness as something which occurs in our heads, hence as a phenomenon of some kind, with that of the horizon from within which the world is present to us’ (p. 192). Essentially, we presuppose the phenomenal conception, but also think about consciousness from our own, first-personal perspective – thereby employing the horzonal conception without becoming aware of it – to form a conception of a phenomenon whose existence depends on the first-person perspective we take on it: a curious, subjective kind of phenomenon which must somehow be integrated with the objective world. We are thus landed with the problem of consciousness, and inspired to propose a metaphysical theory to deal with it. The error which causes this problem to arise, as Valberg sees it, consists in mistaking the presence of phenomena within the horizon of consciousness, with the presence of puzzling subjective phenomena. And this occurs through neglect of the horzonal conception: we fail to adequately think through what it means to think about consciousness from the first-personal perspective.

Now I internalised all of this many years ago; but since I was not sure what to do with it, it remained compartmentalised within my thinking, just like the ideas of other philosophers who I could see were onto something, although I was not quite sure what – in this particular case, I was sure it was something important, however. I have never doubted the distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions; not since I first grasped it. The question for me was where to take it. And the Transcendent Hypothesis was the answer I eventually came up with. From Valberg's paper, it is clear that he thinks I have neglected the distinction, made the standard mistake he diagnoses of presupposing the phenomenal conception, and simply come up with a new theory about the nature of the 'problematic phenomenon'. That is not how I see it.

As I see it, the Transcendent Hypothesis is a development of Valberg's thinking about consciousness, which has the distinction between the phenomenal and horizontal conceptions at its heart. I was not in a position to simply agree with Valberg about consciousness, because there are certain aspects of where he takes his reflection on the phenomenal / horizontal distinction which I have never been able to accept; and not wanting to be what Lester Young called a 'repeater pencil', I would have avoided the topic of consciousness if I had thought Valberg had it entirely right. It is Valberg's direction of travel *after* the phenomenal / horizontal distinction is made central to reflection on the nature of mind – as I agree that it should be – which has always been the problem for me. Trying to avoid the elements of his account which I could not accept was crucial to working out my own account. There are three of these.

### (1) Impossibilities

Valberg thinks that the horizon of consciousness is a nothingness which is caused by activity in the brain. Since something physical cannot cause that which is nothing at all (nothing apart from what appears within in), he thinks this compels us to accept an impossibility as actual. This, he thinks, is the natural resting place of philosophical inquiry in this area; and he sees wisdom in just accepting and learning to live with it. It is just one of a number of impossibilities which Valberg thinks ordinary reflection ultimately leads us to, and which philosophy can do nothing more than make explicit to us. I respect this position, but my natural and unsophisticated reaction to it – which I am unable to see anything wrong with – is that if something is impossible, then it cannot happen;

so there must be something wrong with the reasoning that leads you to believe that it does happen. I think the task of philosophy is to answer certain kinds of natural curiosity, not to distil, clarify and intensify them, thereafter leaving us to acquiesce in their perfected forms.

## (2) The Phenomenal Conception

Valberg thinks, and I agree, that there is a widespread neglect of the horizontal conception. But it seems to me that he makes the opposite mistake of neglecting the phenomenal conception; if we have two ways of thinking about consciousness, then both should be integral to, and reconciled within, our final account. For although Valberg grants the legitimacy of the phenomenal conception, it has no real place in his account. It serves primarily to provide his diagnosis of where others go wrong, and within his own account, it strikes me as merely an awkwardness. For on the one hand, Valberg thinks that the phenomenal conception, since it applies to phenomena, can only apply to the sole repository of phenomena: the objective world. Thus in his definitive exposition, he says: ‘The point is not (of course) to deny that there are states, events, processes, etc., that occur or go on “in us” (in our brains and nervous systems) when we think, perceive, feel, will, and so on. It is not, in other words, to deny the validity of the phenomenal conception of mind’ (Valberg 2007: 99). And in an earlier treatment, he is clear that, ‘Like most philosophers these days, I believe that the idea of there being a soul (a spiritual substance) in us, and hence the idea that there are soul-related phenomena (spiritual phenomena) occurring in us, is a fiction. The only phenomena occurring in us are, roughly speaking, biological phenomena’ (Valberg 1992: 145). More conclusively still, he goes on to say that, ‘there are no experiential phenomena, only experiential facts’ (ibid.: 146); that is, facts of presence within an experiential horizon. And yet on the other hand, Valberg grants that some of the phenomena that are present to us in the horizon of consciousness are merely ‘internal objects’ which are exhausted by their presence; such as hallucinations. Since these objects do not have independent existence in space and time, they are not part of ‘the world’ (Valberg 2007: 48-9).

Now in his paper, he says that, ‘there is no denying that we at least sometimes conceive of consciousness (experience) in this [phenomenal] way. Thus, e.g., if you observe me looking at my hand, you might think that light rays reflected from my hand are striking my eyes and initiating a complex string of phenomena whose

upshot is yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand' (p. 192). However, although philosophers standardly conceive the upshot of the causal process to be 'yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand', Valberg thinks this is an erroneous conception, of course – because there are no experiential phenomena. The only phenomena which the phenomenal conception of consciousness can legitimately be applied to are physical ones in the brain, the causal upshot of which is a horizon of consciousness. If Valberg himself were to accept the existence of experiential phenomena, against his own diagnosis of error, then the problem of consciousness would obviously arise in exactly the same way for him.

However, it seems to me that Valberg *already* has this problem: because of his acceptance of internal objects, such as hallucinations. A hallucinatory object is an experiential phenomenon, and experiential phenomena have no obvious resting place in the objective world: hence the standard problem of consciousness. To deny that they exist within the objective world, and claim that they are exhausted by their presence within a horizon, does not tell us what they *are*; if they are phenomena, then like all phenomena, they must have a nature, and if this nature is not physical ... herein we see the old problem re-emerging. Moreover, it seems to me that even without this problem – even if there were no internal objects for Valberg to deal with – his restriction of the phenomenal conception to physical phenomena, such as brain processing, would not be a phenomenal conception of *consciousness*; not unless he were to advocate the physicalist doctrine that brain events are identical to experiential events, which, wisely, he never would. For these physical phenomena, on his view, are simply what *cause* consciousness. They are not conscious phenomena themselves. I conclude that the phenomenal conception has no stable resting place within Valberg's account. He is right to think it is legitimate, just as I do; but in that case it must be integrated with the horisontal conception within a unified account of consciousness.

### (3) Direct Realism

Valberg advocates a sophisticated form of direct realism; it is the only account I know of which, from an experiential perspective, makes proper sense of the title. For if the objects of the world appear within the horizon of consciousness, we are directly aware of them; there are no experiential phenomena to mediate our access.



I have often suspected that the aim of making sense of direct realism motivates much of Valberg's thinking (although I could be wrong about this.) I do not think it is a well-motivated aim; I rather think, following Rorty, that it derives from a history of attempts to find an iron-clad refutation of external world scepticism of the kind which cannot be, and has no need of being, refuted. Something along these lines, as I see it, is provided at a significant juncture in *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Valberg 2007: 111); Valberg's twist is not to attempt to refute scepticism *per se*, but rather disarm it by showing that it is compatible with direct realism. But then, why should we want to be direct realists in the first place? The mainstream of twentieth-century philosophy has presupposed that this is a laudable aim; but that is not a good reason in itself. Valberg offers a simple phenomenological observation; that when we attend – honestly – to our experience, then all we find is the world, not experience itself (Valberg 1992: Chapter 2). This is to be distinguished from the familiar 'transparency' intuition, because Valberg is employing the horizontal conception; experience is not a transparent phenomenon (ibid: 150-1). But nevertheless, whether in its phenomenal or horizontal guise, the whole idea strikes me as thoroughly dubious.

I often find myself travelling home by train at night, sitting next to the window. When you look out of the window in this situation, you can see the landscape passing by, but also a myriad of reflections from the inside of the carriage. What you see can be quite a mess, which it takes some thought to make any worldly sense of; I find myself not really sure what I am looking at and typically give up trying after a while. Now is it really obvious, in such a situation, that 'All we find is the world' (ibid.: 22)? Not to me. It seems considerably more plausible that I find a conscious experience which is the causal upshot of all kinds of things in the world; this strikes me as the *prima facie* situation, once philosophical reflection has begun, but which we can nevertheless easily overlook when viewing conditions are optimal, such as when we stand in front of a tree in broad daylight. And as I point out in *Meaningless*, many of the most prominent philosophers before the twentieth century found this patently obvious. What changed, I think, is that once science came to dominate our intellectual aspirations, the obviousness of this philosophical subject-matter of mediating experience – one which seemed to resist incorporation into the objective world which science can describe – came to seem like something that needed to be dismantled. Direct realism became the goal, and the most natural way to fit this into traditional philosophical concerns was to use it to refute the sceptic. But if the phenomenal conception of

consciousness is legitimate, as Valberg and I both agree that it is, then it seems to me that what we are conceiving must be experiential phenomena which mediate our access to the objective world. The task, as I see it, is to find a way to coherently fit this phenomenal conception in with the horizontal conception. And that is what I was trying to do with the Transcendent Hypothesis.

My leading thought when arriving at the Transcendent Hypothesis – using Valberg’s manner of thinking about dream scepticism, but in light of my three sources of dissatisfaction with his final position, as detailed above – was that if *this* were a dream (me sitting at my desk; you reading these words in whatever your current situation is), then the dream objects I am experiencing must have some kind of reality or nature behind them. Since I take the phenomenal conception to be legitimate, the natural explanation of this is that my experiences of the dream objects are something real. Now in light of the horizontal conception, the reality possessed by the experiences could only be found in a context transcendent to the dream; one in which I am asleep in the objective world and dreaming all of this up (i.e. dreaming the situation in which I am typing at my desk). A model is thereby suggested of consciousness placing us within a horizon in which we find a world to be present (the dream world, in this case), with the reality of consciousness existing in a context which transcends the horizon (the objective world, in this case). Assuming that this is how consciousness always works, and that dream experience is not metaphysically special, I then formed the Transcendent Hypothesis, according to which the same happens in waking life. According to this theory, the reality of waking consciousness is transcendent: it transcends the horizon in which we find the objective world. (I have missed out various complicating factors for clarity of exposition, but they are all there in the book.)

This account fully integrates the horizontal and phenomenal conceptions. The central insight to the horizontal conception, as I see it, is that is that consciousness places us within a horizon, with a world presented inside it, and the reality of the presentation outside it. But since I also take the phenomenal conception seriously, I think the presentations of an objective world which take place within our ordinary, waking horizon (as well as presentations of things that evidently do not belong to that world, such as hallucinations) *are* something: subjective experiences. Since these subjective experiences are found within the horizon of consciousness, then according to the Transcendent Hypothesis, their reality must

transcend that horizon. But since this is also true of the objective world which these subjective experiences indirectly inform us of, the reality of the objective world must also be found in a transcendent context; in the sense that it is the nature of transcendent reality which ensures the effectiveness of our interpretation of conscious experience in terms an objective world. So the reality of everything must be transcendent, to cut a long story short. We live in a transcendent reality which we make sense of with an ultimately incoherent mixture of subjective and objective thinking.

On my view, nothing in the objective world causes or causally affects consciousness, so unlike Valberg, I am not required to accept impossibilities as facts. The objective world and horizon of consciousness are not an ontologically divided being and nothingness, as I see it, but rather two elements of the same representational package: a package we use to make the best sense we can of a reality whose true nature will always radically transcend human understanding. Objective conditions do *seem* to cause subjective, experiential ones, of course, but this is because we must represent subjective experiences as occupants of the objective world in order to apply our causal understanding to them, and thereby predict their comings and goings. Our representational package commits us to causally integrating experience with the objective world, but also provides the philosophical resources to see that this cannot really be what is going on; that we must be misrepresenting the transcendent reality, in order to think of it as different people having different outlooks on the same objective world. The representational package cannot be accurate as a whole, in the sense that it cannot capture the nature of the transcendent reality; which, in the final count, is all there is. But it is a package that works, such that outside of philosophy, we can say that the anaesthetic caused the pain to stop without any qualms whatsoever.

You might sum up the difference between my account and Valberg's as follows. On his account, we must recognise consciousness for the nothingness it is, and thereby learn to accept the impossible fact that nothingness is causally integrated with the objective world. On my account, we must recognise consciousness as a transcendent reality which we misrepresent in terms of subjective experiences, horizons and an objective world, and thereby learn to accept that its causal integration with the objective world is merely apparent. I do not think these two answers are so utterly dissimilar. On the contrary, I think the Transcendent Hypothesis is a Valbergian conception of consciousness, which makes some changes to the original in order to answer the question of what

consciousness *is*. (Valberg thinks this question is misconceived and I do not.) It seems to me a natural extension of Valberg's account.

With this in mind, let us turn to Valberg's three objections to my theory of consciousness. They are all directed to an account according to which conscious experiences are phenomena that belong to a transcendent reality. Well, I do think that we *conceive* of conscious experiences as phenomena (because I accept the legitimacy of the phenomenal conception), and I also think that *what we are conceiving of* has transcendent reality. But here is the crucial point: I think *everything that exists has transcendent reality*. Valberg, I suspect, is thinking of the transcendent reality as another world; but I am thinking of it as our world. On my view, reality is transcendent; and there is only one reality. Since the independent nature of our world is transcendent, it is not something we can substantively describe. But we can and do substantively describe the one and only reality by misrepresenting it as experiential phenomena in causal dialogue with an objective world. We do not thereby capture its independent nature, but our descriptions work for all purposes apart from this metaphysical one.

Valberg's first objection is that it is implausible to hold that our commonplace beliefs about experiences causally interacting with objective conditions 'are the result of a mistake' (p. 190), namely that of misinterpreting transcendent conscious experiences. He asks, 'why we should have the aim of interpreting consciousness as an indirect awareness etc. Or, if it not meant to be an "aim", why suppose that we place such a convoluted and (no doubt) misguided construction on things when all we *seem* to be doing is – in our habitual inductivist way – ascribing a causal connection on the basis of an observed succession of phenomena (e.g., taking drugs and an alteration in the way objects look to us)?' (p. 190).

The first thing to say is that there is only any prospect of a mistake being involved if you are doing metaphysics. In all other walks of life, we will of course continue to talk about objective conditions causing and being caused by experiences. But if we want a metaphysical interpretation of what is going on, then mine will say that this involves misrepresentation; those offered by metaphysical realists who believe in causal transactions between objective conditions and experiences, will say the representation is accurate. Both are fully in accord with the manifest situation, namely that there *seem* to be such causal interactions (note that Valberg says 'seem' in this context too) – and non-metaphysical talk can and will ignore these subtleties.

But then, why do I place this particular ‘construction’ on things? Because I take the phenomenal conception to be legitimate; unless you are an eliminativist, I cannot see how you can avoid this. As I made clear earlier when discussing Valberg’s treatment of the phenomenal conception, I do not think that even he has found any alternative; if brain states are the only things the phenomenal conception can apply to, as he has argued, then I think he actually *is* an eliminativist (in the phenomenal sense only). But if the phenomenal conception is legitimate – if experiences are among the phenomena we refer to – then since they cannot belong to the objective world, I cannot see how they actually can be in causal dialogue with the objective world. So given that we certainly do conceive of them as such, this must be a misrepresentation. Moreover, if experiences are phenomena, then since experiences perceptually inform us about the world, the natural thing to say – and what you *will* say, I think, so long as you are not determined to be a direct realist, for motivations I find highly dubious – is that this perceptual access is indirect.

Valberg’s second objection is that, ‘in order for me to misinterpret C, that is, to take it to have properties it does (or could) not have, I would first have to single out C referentially. Yet if C belongs to a transcendent reality, this is not possible’ (p. 190). He goes on to say that, ‘If this were a dream, the reality that transcends the dream would be, for me, nothing more than “something” that exists or is there – “something” into which I might emerge. In that case, it is not clear how I might, in thought, single out for reference the entities – the objects and phenomena – that comprise the supposedly transcendent reality. They would not be entities about which I might form either a correct or an incorrect interpretation’ (pp. 190-1).

My answer to this is simple: Valberg is right and so the theory he is criticising is wrong. But it is not my theory. He is thinking of individual experiences as things which belong to a transcendent reality, rather than objective reality; he is thinking of transcendent reality as another world. On my view, transcendent reality, conceived as such, is indeed ‘nothing more than “something” that exists or is there – “something” into which I might emerge’ (although I could only emerge into it if it is not the final context, given the horzonal structure of consciousness). We cannot pick out individual objects and events that carve transcendent reality at the joints, and certainly not when we refer to experiences, whose nature can be seen to be illusory within the horizon that contains the objective world. Nevertheless we can conceive of it in a manner which is not in accordance with its independent nature; we can conceive of transcendent reality as imminent reality. And this is

what we do with objective thought, and the shadow concepts we borrow from it in order to conceive of individual experiences. Our objective conception of reality, which gives us our conception of representation vs. misrepresentation (PML, Chapter 7), plus the phenomenal conception of experience, is what facilitates reference. Reference is thereby made to transcendent reality – because there is nothing else to refer to – but metaphysical reflection reveals that despite the utility to us of the referential distinctions we make in this way, they cannot be sensitive to the independent nature of this reality in the straightforward manner which metaphysical realism about the objective world supposes. Thus metaphysics must turn its back on objective thought when it comes to describe this independent nature, leaving it with a mere ‘something’.

Reading between the lines, I get the distinct impression that Valberg thinks it is puzzling (to put it mildly) and rather odd (to go a little further), that I say there is a transcendent reality. Well here is a really straightforward way of looking at it. Whenever you want to say what reality really, truly is, you always have to point blindly outside the horizon to a mere “‘something” into which I might emerge’, as Valberg puts it. That is why I say that reality is transcendent: it is transcendent to (outside of) the horizon. The objective world, by contrast, is *within* the horizon; it is within a *representation of* the true reality. Point inside and you get our representation; point outside and you get what we are representing. Since what we are representing is outside, we say that reality is transcendent. That sounds like a sensible enough position to me.

Valberg’s third criticism (p. 191) is premised on the view that I think *this* (the here and now in which I am typing these words and take myself to be wide awake) is a dream; Valberg thinks this because he thinks believing that reality is transcendent, is equivalent to believing that waking life is a dream. Based on this premise, he says that out anyone who believes this is *not* a dream (i.e. normal / sane people), cannot accept my position that consciousness is transcendent without absurdly denying the existence of their own consciousness. The reason is that if they accept that consciousness is transcendent, while denying that there is a transcendent reality (as there cannot be if this is not a dream, according to Valberg’s reasoning), then they must deny the existence of all consciousness, including their own.

This seems both right and unsurprising. If somebody thinks there is no transcendent reality, then they would hardly be attracted to the position that consciousness is transcendent; unless of course they had eliminativist ambitions.

But I think there is a transcendent reality (because I think reality is transcendent) and I do not have eliminativist ambitions. So the real question is surely: does believing that there is a transcendent reality, as I do, commit you to the view that this is a dream? Or we might just ask: do I think this is a dream?

Well, there are eminent philosophers around who take the idea that this is a computer simulation designed by aliens very seriously. And there would be a certain panache involved in embracing the claim that this is a dream; of the kind currently in-vogue, as eliminative materialists try to subvert the anti-physicalist meme of zombies by proudly proclaiming: ‘I am a zombie’ (e.g. Garfield 2016: 75). However I am afraid that I am not saying anything so radical and exciting, so no: I do not think this is a dream. I do not think I have ever seriously entertained the thought that this might *really* be a dream; not in the sense of not already being sure at the moment the issue arises, and consequently having to decide one way or the other. Moreover, I am certain that the position that this is a dream is not entailed by my theory. For if this is a dream, then the world which transcends it is the objective one. But according to my theory, the world that transcends what I call ‘waking life’ (the kind I am now engaged in), is not the objective world, but rather (in the final context) the independently existing reality, i.e. transcendent reality. Hence according to my theory, this is not a dream; the implication is squarely built into it.

In the process of making this final objection, Valberg says that, ‘If (as I believe) this is not a dream, there is no transcendent reality’ (p. 191). But why not? Valberg thinks that from the perspective of a dream there is a transcendent reality; his whole philosophy is built around this idea. From the perspective of a dream, the transcendent reality is the objective world in which you are asleep in bed, dreaming. He thinks that the horizon of the dream can be displaced by the wider horizon of waking life. But given that we are conscious both in a dream and in waking life, and so must apply the horizontal conception of consciousness in both cases, why should the same not apply to the consciousness of waking life? Surely, once more, there must be a transcendent reality: the reality which is transcendent from the perspective of waking life. (Transcendence is a *relative* notion.) Otherwise, from the point of view of the horizontal conception, what is supposed to be ontologically grounding our waking consciousness? You could say ‘nothing’: because consciousness is a nothingness. But in the dream case this was not Valberg’s answer. The answer was to be found in the objective world: somebody was dreaming and the physical reality of this caused their dream

experience. Well, it cannot be a matter of causation when we are talking about a reality that transcends the objective world. And once you get this far, you have more or less arrived at my Transcendent Hypothesis. I think I have followed Valberg's principles through consistently, given that I wanted to go somewhere different with them.

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## ‘Life is Meaningless.’ Compared to What?

Damian Veal\*

### Abstract

James Tartaglia argues that the question of the meaning of life, when properly construed, is ‘the keystone of philosophy,’ that which ‘locks its traditional preoccupations in place’ and ‘allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science.’ He also argues that we ought to reject the question’s premise and conclude that ‘life is meaningless.’ This paper critically examines what Tartaglia calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ and its implications. It concludes that Tartaglia provides no good reasons for maintaining that his version of the question is not, in the words of his imaginary interlocutor, ‘a philosophical dead-end,’ but that there is a broader sense of the question that might indeed qualify as a fundamental wellspring of philosophical inquiry.

### Introduction

James Tartaglia’s *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality* is a work of rare philosophical ambition.<sup>1</sup> Deeming the ‘big ideas’ and ‘sweeping visions’ of the great systematic metaphysicians of the past to be both more interesting and more ‘philosophical’ than the modest, piecemeal efforts of his contemporaries, Tartaglia has self-consciously set out to emulate the former. Mercifully lacking the overweening grandiosity of some of those past greats who seem to have inspired him, however, Tartaglia is modest enough to admit that he ‘may well not have succeeded.’<sup>2</sup> Also happily absent is the kind of tortuous, circumlocutory prose for which some of those same luminaries are notorious: Tartaglia’s book is elegantly written and clearly argued throughout. And for those who may fear that, in purporting to offer a ‘system’—‘A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality,’ no less—the book might test the limits of both their patience and their shelving capacity, it should be noted that its soaring ambition is by no means reflected in its bulk, weighing in as it does at a svelte two-hundred pages.

Given the audacious scope of Tartaglia’s book, comprising rich discussions

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<sup>1</sup> Tartaglia (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

and provocative claims about everything from the nature of philosophy and the meaning of life to the problems of consciousness, time, and universals—and, far more audaciously still, claiming to have provided the keys to solving all of these problems in a mere two-hundred pages—Tartaglia leaves himself unusually wide open to criticism. But if a fair test of the worth of a work of philosophy is not how much consensus it generates—something that rarely ever happens in philosophy anyway—but rather how much rich philosophical debate it provokes, I expect *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* will prove itself worthy indeed. Regarding my own contribution to the anticipated debates, I expect the present paper to be only my opening salvo. Given the theme of the present symposium—namely, ‘Nihilism and the Meaning of Life’—I limit myself here to addressing Tartaglia’s principal claims regarding these two issues.

## 1. Theme and Outline of the Paper

That the human species has no ‘overall meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ that it does not owe its existence to some ‘transcendent’ being ‘beyond the physical universe,’ is not a claim that is likely to raise many eyebrows, much less hackles, in contemporary academia. From the point of view of modern science, informed by the findings of cosmology, geology and evolutionary biology, to ask what the human species is *for*, to ask what its *meaning* or *purpose* might be, is every bit as absurd as asking after the ‘meaning’ of electricity or the ‘purpose’ of a planet. What are penguins for? What is the overall meaning of hippopotamuses? What was the point of dinosaurs? If the question of the ‘overall meaning’ of the human species strikes you as any less preposterous than these questions about penguins, hippos and dinosaurs, then—from the point of view of modern science, at least—you have a whole lot of catching up to do.

It is because academics are rationally obliged to take our best established knowledge of the world seriously that few are nowadays inclined to regard such questions as good or even meaningful ones. While it makes sense to talk about the meaning of a sentence or a gesture, about the purpose of an artefact or an action, and about the ‘overall meaning’ of a fable or narrative, we have long since known that biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have ‘overall meanings’ or purposes.<sup>3</sup> While we can understand, in psychological and

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<sup>3</sup> For accessible yet sophisticated introductions to the issues see, e.g., Kitcher (1982), Dawkins (1991), and Dennett (1995).

evolutionary terms, why human beings might have a natural tendency to suppose there must be some inscrutable ‘meaning’ to their existence—just as we can explain their natural tendency to assume purpose, design, intention and meaning lurking behind natural disasters, personal misfortunes, and the appearance of rainbows or comets<sup>4</sup>—no one who is even moderately well-acquainted with the findings of the past two centuries of science may take such assumptions as their own; not, at any rate, with a clear intellectual conscience.

It is for reasons such as these, I take it, that those few philosophers who have waded into the murky and mercurial waters of the question of ‘the meaning of life’ in recent decades, while not neglecting to discuss and critically evaluate traditional theistic approaches to the question, have also not *restricted themselves* to such approaches. This strikes me as both eminently reasonable and just what one would expect. Given the prevalence of theistic and otherwise supernaturalist beliefs throughout world history and across human societies, one would not expect philosophers to neglect them entirely. By the same token, however, one would also not expect them to adopt the assumptions of such metaphysics as their own—even if a small number of them may be attracted to the question in the first place precisely because they *do* share some such assumptions. After all, if theistic or supernaturalist assumptions were to delimit the parameters of the inquiry, such that the only permissible construal of the question of life’s meaning, or of the conditions of a meaningful life, would have to invoke some divine purpose or supernatural, meaning-bestowing context, this would very obviously rule out any and all possible *naturalist* approaches to meaning, significance and value a priori. Since we do not ordinarily permit the parameters of our intellectual inquiries to be dictated by the default assumptions of medieval scholasticism—not, at any rate, those of us who conduct our inquiries outside the cloistered confines of seminaries and theology departments—why would we do so here?

Now, although these remarks ought to be uncontroversial—after all, there are no approaches being ruled out a priori here—it turns out that not all philosophers agree that this is a reasonable way to proceed. More specifically, as those who have read this journal’s recent symposium on Thaddeus Metz’s book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*<sup>5</sup> will be aware, James Tartaglia is one

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Gergely & Csibra (2003), Guthrie (1993); Kelemen (1999, 2004), Kelemen & DiYanni (2005), Kelemen & Rosset (2009), McCauley (2000, 2011), Pyysiainen (2009), and Tremplin (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Metz (2013). For the complete symposium see Morioka (2015).

philosopher who is not happy about it at all; indeed, he seems to be positively fuming about it. What Tartaglia is most incensed about, it seems, is that what he calls a ‘new paradigm’ within analytic philosophy, a paradigm ostensibly devoted to exploring the question of ‘the meaning of life,’ entirely neglects what he calls the *traditional* question of the meaning of life.<sup>6</sup> And the traditional question of life’s meaning, Tartaglia insists, is not only the sole *real* question, the only obviously and legitimately *philosophical* question of life’s meaning; it is also nothing less than *the* fundamental question of philosophy.

In what follows I critically explore Tartaglia’s arguments for these claims as presented in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. In section 2 I introduce what Tartaglia calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ and indicate some of the reasons for his exasperation with the ‘new paradigm’ approach. In section 3 I address Tartaglia’s claim that there is only one ‘obvious philosophical question in the area’ before clarifying just what this ‘real’ question of the meaning of life boils down to. In section 4 I evaluate Tartaglia’s reasons for claiming that this question is not only ‘as serious as your life’ but also ‘the keystone of philosophy.’ In other words, why does he think it matters so much? Having failed to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question in section 4, I return to it in section 5 and suggest that an adequate answer must take into account the principal metaphysical thesis Tartaglia presents in the second half of the book—namely, what he calls his ‘Transcendent Hypothesis.’ In the conclusion I suggest that, although Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life ought to be abandoned, there is yet a broader sense of the question that might indeed qualify as one of the fundamental wellsprings of philosophical inquiry.

## 2. The ‘Real’ Question of the Meaning of Life

In order to get a handle on what Tartaglia calls the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, one need only reflect on the fact that he would regard the opening two paragraphs of section 1 above as an outright *denigration* of this question.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in view of all he has said on this issue—not only in the book presently under discussion, but also in several recently published papers devoted to the same topic<sup>8</sup>—it is safe to say that he would regard these paragraphs as the

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<sup>6</sup> Tartaglia (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 92; (2015a).

<sup>8</sup> Tartaglia (2015a, 2016a, 2016b).

very epitome of what he characterises as a pernicious ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ a ‘conspicuous tragicomic’ element of which has been ‘the phenomenon of philosophers turning against philosophy.’ According to Tartaglia this *prima facie* ‘absurd agenda’ has been ‘a dominant theme within the profession since the 19th century,’ with the most influential versions of it attempting to ‘make philosophy more like science.’<sup>9</sup>

What Tartaglia takes to be the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, then, is precisely the question I have suggested most academics would nowadays regard as being based upon obsolete, prescientific assumptions: namely, the question of whether or not the human species has an ‘overall purpose’ or ‘overall meaning.’ Thus, in his unsparingly critical review of Metz’s *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Approach*, Tartaglia suggests that the book goes awry right from the start by *addressing itself to the wrong issue*. While one might think that what Metz’s book ought to be about should be a matter for Metz to decide, Tartaglia’s implicit assumption seems to be that the book ought not to have been published at all—not if it has any pretensions to be a genuine work of *philosophy*, at any rate.<sup>10</sup> Seizing upon a passage from Metz’s Introduction in which he clarifies the scope of the book, Tartaglia suggests that the very fact that it does not address itself to the question of *whether the human species has a meaning* already demonstrates that ‘something has gone wrong.’ This is because, according to Tartaglia, to ask the question of the meaning of life just *is* to ask ‘whether the human species has a meaning.’<sup>11</sup> Metz’s book, on the other hand, since it sets out from the assumption that what ‘[m]ost people, or at least philosophers, interested in topics readily placed under the rubric of “the meaning of life” ultimately want to know [is] what, if anything, would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care,’<sup>12</sup> thereby disqualifies itself as a genuine work of philosophy from the outset.

Were it the case that in rebuking other approaches as ‘not really philosophical,’ Tartaglia were simply expressing the kind of haughty disdain that Continental and analytic philosophers sometimes display towards one another, this would hardly merit comment. However, while I do think it’s possible to detect a tone of proprietorial superciliousness in the way Tartaglia discusses the

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<sup>9</sup> Tartaglia 2016, pp. 1, 185 n. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Metz explicitly notes this implication of Tartaglia’s critique in his reply (Metz 2015, p. 230).

<sup>11</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Metz (2013), p. 3; Tartaglia (2015), p. 95; Metz (2015), p. 230.

work of other philosophers—something most audible when, for example, he suggests that those who take a different approach to the question of life’s meaning than his own do so ‘because they are very confused’<sup>13</sup>—such an attitude should also be understood in the context of the principal metaphilosophical thesis of Tartaglia’s book. For according to *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, the question of the meaning of life—understood as the question of whether there might be an ‘overall meaning’ to human existence—is *the* philosophical question par excellence. Indeed, according to Tartaglia it is nothing less than the original, paradigmatic philosophical question; the question in which all of philosophy’s perennial problems are rooted; which unifies all of its disparate concerns; and which motivates people to take an interest in it in the first place. As such, Tartaglia argues, philosophers should openly embrace the question as their core subject matter and special areas of expertise.<sup>14</sup>

Should philosophers overcome their misguided sense of embarrassment over this question and reclaim it for philosophy, suggests Tartaglia, it would have many salutary consequences: it would reinvigorate philosophy by explicitly reconnecting it with its roots in matters of natural human concern; it would make sense of and justify the fact that there is a discipline called philosophy at all, by clarifying ‘what it is all about’; it would illuminate the history of philosophy and clarify what unites its diverse concerns by revealing the underlying connection between its theoretical and practical branches; it would help to restore philosophy’s self-confidence in an age dominated by aggressive scientism; it would provide a clear line of demarcation between science and philosophy, so that philosophy can thrive in peace, and science, in gaining clarity about its own proper remit, can learn to ‘mind its own business’;<sup>15</sup> and it would restore philosophy’s unique cultural voice by showing that science is not the only legitimate mode of discourse about the nature of reality—philosophy, he suspects, can more than hold its own on this score.<sup>16</sup>

Not least among the startling implications of Tartaglia’s thesis here is that, contrary to what one would expect, it is not contemporary *philosophers* who

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<sup>13</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Tartaglia (2016), chapter 3 *passim* and Tartaglia (2016a).

<sup>15</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Although Tartaglia writes ‘at least’ rather than ‘more than’ (ibid., p. 11), it becomes clear later in the book that he thinks scientists not only cannot but *should not try* to address questions regarding ‘the nature of reality,’ for this is the special domain of expertise of the philosopher qua a priori metaphysician (see chapter 8 especially).

best understand the true nature of philosophy, but rather those members of the general public who, while they may know nothing whatsoever about what such philosophers spend their lives thinking, talking and writing about, at least understand something that these philosophers themselves appear not to: namely, that the core subject matter of philosophy—that which defines it *as* philosophy—is nothing other than *the meaning of life*.

Were Tartaglia right about this it would be a surprising states of affairs indeed. Could it really be the case that people who may have never read a work of philosophy, and who might not be able to name more than a few famous philosophers (and almost certainly none who are still alive), might nevertheless understand the nature and motivating concerns of philosophy better than philosophers themselves? Could it be the case that philosophers, of all people, are so thoroughly bereft of self-knowledge that they have no real understanding of what it is they devote their lives to, or why they are doing it, whereas people who are barely acquainted with it nonetheless understand perfectly well ‘what it’s all about’?<sup>17</sup>

Whatever one might think about this *prima facie* implausible suggestion, it at least helps to make sense of what it is that so infuriates Tartaglia about the ‘new paradigm’ approach to the question of the meaning of life. For while these philosophers typically underline the notorious obscurity, vagueness, ambiguity and elusiveness of the expression at the outset—usually as a prelude to getting clear about the variety of ways it can be, has been, and might legitimately be construed—Tartaglia regards all such attempts at conceptual disambiguation and clarification as both gratuitous and disingenuous in view of what he regards as one blindingly obvious fact: namely, that the meaning of the expression ‘the meaning of life’ is *already clear to everyone*. Those who might be inclined to dispute this by pointing out that the expression appears to admit of a wide variety of different, often incompatible or at best overlapping usages, and that the variety of ways it *has* in fact been construed bears witness to this, are accused by Tartaglia of deliberate obfuscation, of muddying perfectly transparent waters, and of perpetuating a ruinous neglect of the only ‘real’ or ‘true’ meaning of the question—the meaning that, according to Tartaglia, it has *always* had, and which it *must retain* if philosophy is to rediscover its true identity and purpose.

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<sup>17</sup> Tartaglia (2016a).

Thus, although Tartaglia describes himself as an analytic philosopher, he has very little patience with the suggestion that the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ is one that *requires* any conceptual analysis at all—beyond, that is, a few quick reminders about how the expression is supposedly used in everyday life.<sup>18</sup> While he starts with the fact that the question has been dismissed, denigrated and ridiculed because of its ‘supposedly hopeless obscurity,’ he suggests that the ridicule is only a defence mechanism—laughter, he says, ‘always works well when dealing with something that has touched a nerve.’<sup>19</sup> As for the claim that the meaning of the question is obscure, vague, ambiguous and so on, Tartaglia seems to think this amounts to some kind of subterfuge. Thus when Brooke Alan Trisel remarks, in a recent article for this journal, that the expression ‘meaning of life’ is ‘one of the best known, but most obscure phrases in the English language’; when Richard Taylor writes that ‘[t]he question of whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret,’ adding that the more we concentrate on it ‘the more it seems to elude’ us and ‘evaporate as an intelligible question’; when Julian Baggini writes that the question is ‘vague, general and unclear... not so much a single question as a placeholder for a whole set of questions’; and when Timothy Mawson writes that ‘when one asks “What is the meaning of life?,” one asks an ambiguous question, or—perhaps better—one asks an assemblage of largely overlapping, but significantly different, questions at once’; in all these cases, along with dozens more that could be cited, Tartaglia would suspect the authors of either disingenuousness or wilful obscurantism (or both); that is, of pretending not to understand the meaning of a question the intention of which ought to be entirely obvious to everyone—and to *philosophers* above all.<sup>20</sup> To the ridiculers and the head scratchers respectively, then, Tartaglia’s response is as follows: ‘the question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure.’<sup>21</sup>

In the following three sections I will critically assess two questions that arise

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<sup>18</sup> Tartaglia identifies himself as an analytic philosopher in the first paragraph of the Preface (p. ix). As readers of the book will discover, this is not the only concept he seems to think requires no real conceptual analysis or elucidation: the same goes for all the book’s central concepts, including meaning, consciousness, experience, objectivity, reality, and transcendence.

<sup>19</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Trisel (2016), p. 4; Taylor (1967/2000), p. 167; Baggini (2005), p. 2; Mawson (2010), p. 20. One is reminded of Berkeley’s famous remark about philosophers kicking up dust and then complaining they can’t see. As noted above, Tartaglia also has another, even less charitable suggestion: such philosophers are just ‘very confused’ (2015a, p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.



from this claim. First, what, according to Tartaglia, is the precise import of the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, and what reasons does he offer in support of his claim that this is ‘anything but obscure’? Second, why does he claim that the question is ‘as serious as your life’? I will address the first question in section 3 before tackling the second in sections 4 and 5.

### 3. Clarifying the Meaning of the Question

So far all we know is that Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life is equivalent to the question of whether there is an ‘overall meaning’ or purpose for which the human species exists. What, however, does *that* mean? Well, it turns out that Tartaglia has in mind something very specific indeed: life, we are told, could *only* be meaningful if there were a *wider context of meaning* within which it takes place. Now, when Tartaglia says ‘wider’ he doesn’t just mean *wider*; he means a *whole lot* wider; in fact, he tells us, only something which *transcends the entire physical universe* could do the job. This is because things can *only* have a meaning if they are placed in a ‘wider context of meaning,’ and the physical universe is *not* a context of meaning; rather, it is a *meaningless* context. It follows, then, that for our lives to have any meaning or purpose at all, ‘there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended,’ ‘a context of meaning that *transcended* the spatiotemporal world’ and which ‘would provide reasons for the existence of the physical universe.’<sup>22</sup> For Tartaglia, then, what he calls the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life,<sup>23</sup> the only ‘obvious philosophical question in the area,’<sup>24</sup> is that which asks whether such a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ exists. The necessary and sufficient condition for a meaningful life—in the absence of which everyone’s life would be meaningless—thus turns out to be not only a cosmic one, but an *extra-cosmic*, supernatural, or (as Tartaglia prefers to say) ‘transcendent’ one.

Needless to say, these are all hugely contentious claims, and not ones to which anyone is likely to assent unless they are backed up by *exceptionally* strong arguments. So what is supposed to rationally motivate them, and what reasons does Tartaglia offer in justification of them? The first question—namely,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Tartaglia (2015a).

<sup>24</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.

what motivates Tartaglia to insist, so doggedly and dogmatically, that *this* specific form of the question is its *only* legitimate sense, the ‘only obvious philosophical question in the area’—I find somewhat baffling, and will return to in sections 4 and 5.<sup>25</sup> Regarding the first question—that of the arguments Tartaglia employs to support the claim—I will explore this in the following three subsections. In doing so, we will gain clarity about what it is that Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life amounts to.

### 3.1 The Meaning of ‘the Meaning of ...’

First, though he says such analysis ought not to be necessary—it is not as if there is ‘an enigma in need of deciphering,’ he writes<sup>26</sup>—Tartaglia does appeal to a brief elucidation of the meaning of the terms. Thus he insists that the question of the meaning *of* life must be sharply differentiated from meaning *in* life. He illustrates this with the analogy of a film. When we ask about meaning *in* a film, he claims, we are talking about such things as ‘what is motivating the characters, their personalities, trials and tribulations etc.’ When we ask after the meaning *of* the film, on the other hand, we are asking about its significance in a wider social or historical setting. Thus we might say that the meaning of an early Western, for example, is that it ‘reveals the negative stereotypes in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America towards Native Americans, and also perhaps the new-found confidence of a country creating an idealised version of its history.’ It is this sort of thing we are asking about, suggests Tartaglia, when we ask about ‘the meaning of the film.’ From this he concludes as follows:

Thus *meaning in* concerns the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon (such as a film, novel, sport or musical composition), while *meaning of* concerns the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context (a society, most typically).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tartaglia might object to the accusation of dogmatism, but in view of the fact that he insists upon the undeniable obviousness of the claim, even accusing those who disagree with it of being *anti-philosophical*, quite literally on page 1 of the book, the charge is hardly a baseless one.

<sup>26</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 96; cf. Tartaglia (2016): ‘The question did not drop from the sky as an enigma to be deciphered, but is rather a natural question which we know human beings have been asking since at least the beginning of civilization and were probably asking long before that’ (p. 2).

<sup>27</sup> Tartaglia (2015), pp. 92, 93.

Is this plausible? When people ask about the meaning of a film, novel, play, song, poem, fable, allegory, parable, riddle and so on, *are* they asking about its significance in a wider social or historical setting? Fortunately, we do not need to engage in any contentious ordinary language analysis or ‘x-phi’ (experimental philosophy) research on this question. Instead, we can simply enter phrases such as ‘the meaning of the film’ and ‘the meaning of the song’ into an internet search engine and see what it comes up with. While I will leave this an exercise for the reader rather than citing examples of what turned up when I did such searches,<sup>28</sup> I think it will be clear enough that what people typically want to know when they ask such questions is *not* what its social or historical significance might be. Rather, what they seem to be seeking is something like an *explanation* or *interpretation*, the kind of explanation that would *make sense* of the film, song, poem, play or whatever it happens to be.<sup>29</sup> This becomes even clearer, I think, if we ask about the *overall* meaning of something, which is what Tartaglia says the question of the meaning of life amounts to. For as noted earlier, while it makes dubious sense at best to ask about the overall meaning of a biological species, people *do* ask about the overall meaning of *narratives*. Indeed, I would suggest that it is precisely contexts in which people are asking about the meaning of a film, story, play, myth, saga, allegory, fable, parable and the like that talk of ‘overall meaning’ seems most at home. That such an interpretation might also shed light on what people often mean when they talk about ‘the meaning of life’—that is, roughly, that they are seeking something like a *global narrative*, *worldview* or *explanatory framework* within which to make overall sense of their lives—is a possibility that I have no space to examine here, but I return to it briefly at the end of the paper.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 A Single Question or Many?

As noted above, philosophers who have written about the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ typically address what I called the ‘murky and mercurial’

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<sup>28</sup> I will only add that it helps include the titles of well-known films, songs, stories etc.—and that the website <moviemeanings.com> seems like a good place to go if you want to read interpretations of popular films.

<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that such requests for explanation or interpretation might not sometimes require some socio-historical contextualisation, of course, but my point is that this is not what people *typically want to be told* about when they ask, for example, ‘what is the meaning of this movie?’

<sup>30</sup> For an intriguing proposal along these lines see Seachris (2009). For some interesting discussion of the implications vis-à-vis naturalism see Trisel (2016) and the literature cited therein.

nature of the question at the beginning. No doubt *some* of the ambiguity and indeterminateness of the question concerns the term ‘life,’ for it is not clear whether the question is asking about the meaning of *human life as a whole*, the meaning of *people’s individual lives*, or both. According to Metz, for example, as we saw above, what people who ask the question typically want to know is ‘what would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care.’<sup>31</sup> For Tartaglia, on the other hand, as well as many of those who approach the question from a theistic perspective, the question is primarily about the purpose or overall meaning of human life in general, an answer to which would *also* provide the meaning of people’s individual lives. Nevertheless, in spite of this difference, it is at least agreed that the ‘life’ that the question addresses is *human* life rather than the life of lives of bacteria, barnacles, bison or baboons. It therefore does not seem to be the case that it is any real obscurity about what the term ‘life’ refers to that is the principal source of the question’s ambiguity.

What is generally acknowledged to be the obscurity, vagueness, ambiguity and indeterminacy of the question, then, primarily concerns the notoriously slippery meaning of the term ‘meaning’ itself. Yet although Tartaglia admits that ‘there are undeniably many different senses of the word “meaning,”’ so that ‘the question clearly has plenty of scope for obscurity,’ he claims that ‘this is irrelevant, because there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses like “value,” “significance” and “purpose” are easily related.’<sup>32</sup> The problem with this suggestion is that the terms ‘value,’ ‘significance’ and ‘purpose’ are obviously *not* synonymous or interchangeable. Indeed, it is precisely *because* they are not typically used synonymously that what Tartaglia says about ‘meaning’ here—namely, that ‘there are undeniably many different senses of the word’—carries over to the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Thus when Joshua Seachris writes, in the General Introduction to a recent anthology entitled *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, that the question is ‘undeniably characterized by significant vagueness,’ and that ‘one cannot plausibly deny that this vagueness makes the question difficult to understand,’ he is simply reporting the conclusion arrived at by the vast majority of philosophers who have examined the question.<sup>33</sup> Of course, it is always open

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<sup>31</sup> Metz (2013), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Seachris (2012), p. 3.

to someone to stipulate the specific way *they* are going to interpret the question, or to argue for the way they think it *ought* to be understood. However, this is obviously very different from claiming, as does Tartaglia, that the meaning of the question is ‘anything but obscure’ and that the only reason it might *seem* obscure is that ‘the form it has acquired has potential to mislead’—a potential which some philosophers ‘have willingly latched onto,’ either because they are part of an ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ because they are afraid that they might be seen to be taking a religious question seriously,<sup>34</sup> or because they want to change the subject entirely so that they can ‘engage in secular moralising’ and become ‘atheist preachers.’<sup>35</sup> Thus when Tartaglia says that he emphasises ‘the impersonal question of why human beings exist... simply because it is what the question of the meaning of life concerns,’ adding that he regards this as ‘a statement of the obvious, despite the fact that professional philosophy went to considerable lengths during the last century to make it seem otherwise,’<sup>36</sup> it seems to me that it may be Tartaglia himself rather than those philosophers who have been the targets of his criticism who is being disingenuous.

In order to see that the expressions ‘meaning of *x*,’ ‘value of *x*’ and ‘purpose of *x*’ are *not* synonymous or intersubstitutable, in most contexts at least, one need only call to mind typical instances in which they *are* used. Indeed, are there *any* situations in which one uses the word ‘meaning’ where ‘value’ or ‘purpose’ would have done just as well, or in which, although one says ‘meaning’ it is obviously implied that what one intends is ‘value’ or ‘purpose’? Though one may be able to think of some such situations, the fact that they do not readily spring to mind suggests that it is certainly not what one *typically means* when one talks about the ‘meaning of’ something. Thus, when, in everyday situations, someone asks ‘What is the meaning of this?,’ it would be exceptionally

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<sup>34</sup> This is a curious imputation, yet one that Tartaglia reiterates throughout the book. More curious still, he seems to think that something like this is the principal motivation for naturalism and physicalism. Thus the only reason anyone thinks ‘science in anything like the form we understand it’ could resolve the problem of the nature of consciousness is that, having ‘grasped that it will not fit into a scientific world-view, most philosophers become frightened.’ This is because ‘if you believe reality outruns the physical, then you seem to have strayed into the realms of religion: you have opened up the possibility that there is a meaning of life’ (Tartaglia 2016, p. 10). Tartaglia never really attempts to substantiate such bald assertions, and they seem to be based upon little more than amateur psychologising. Yet he depends on them for a whole lot of heavy-lifting, not only in terms of how he characterises the history of philosophy, and the dialectical dynamics of philosophical debate (see, e.g., pp. 178–181), but also in his accounts of what he takes to be the motivational sources of science, philosophy, and religion (*passim*).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp. 1, 4–5, 10–11, 12ff. and *passim*. Tartaglia (2015a), pp. 3–4.

<sup>36</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 3.

tendentious to suggest that what they usually mean to ask is ‘What is the *value* of this?’ or ‘What is the *purpose* of this?’ Moreover, as we have seen above, Tartaglia argues that when we ask after the meaning *of* something we are talking about ‘the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context.’ But, to stick to his own example, even if we were to agree that there might be contexts in which, when someone asks ‘what is the meaning of this film?’, what they want to know about is its wider social or historical significance, we would obviously *not* thereby be asking what its *value* or *purpose* is. Indeed, regardless of who is right about what people typically mean when they ask about the meaning of a movie, play, poem, fable, song and so on—that is, whether they mean to ask about its social or historical significance (as Tartaglia maintains) or rather about how it ought to be interpreted (as I have suggested)—in neither case would they be asking about its value or its purpose.

In response to such objections Tartaglia might claim that, although it is obviously true that the terms not *always* used synonymously or interchangeably, they nonetheless *are* so used whenever one asks the question—the *real* question, that is—of the meaning of life. The problem with this response is that, if this were so, it ought to be obvious that the following three questions are all asking the same thing: ‘What is the value of the human species?’ ‘What is the purpose of the human species?’ ‘What is the significance of the human species?’ What a sentence means, of course, typically depends upon the intention of the speaker, the context of usage, the other sentences to which it is inferentially connected, and so on. But without running through a list of possible interpretations of these questions, or examples of how they might be used in different situations, I think it ought to be clear enough that, on the face of it at least, they do *not* all appear to be asking the same thing.

It is starting to look as though Tartaglia’s one true question, the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, is not a single question after all, but rather—as many of those Tartaglia has rebuked for failing to understand (or else feigning not to understand) its only ‘obvious’ meaning have argued—a disjunctive one, which breaks down upon analysis into a series of partially overlapping yet distinct questions sharing at best a certain family resemblance.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Timothy Mawson has argued—quite persuasively in my opinion—that it is precisely *because* the question is equivocal, ambiguous and multiply

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Baggini (2005), Hepburn (1965), Mawson (2010), and Metz (2013).

interpretable in this way, that people who ask it tend to find any *single answer* to it unsatisfactory.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not that is so, I think enough has been said to make it clear that, contrary to what Tartaglia maintains, there is no one obvious, clear, univocal or universal meaning to the expression ‘the meaning of life.’<sup>39</sup> What still remains to be done is to clarify the specific sense in which Tartaglia intends the question to be understood. This I will do in the next subsection, before going on to ask, in section 4, why he thinks it matters so much.

### 3.3 *Whose Meaning?*

Although, as we have seen, there is no single, univocal meaning or interpretation of the question of the meaning of life, there is nevertheless one perspective from which it *would* make sense to think of the value, purpose and significance of human beings as synonymous. In order to see this, let us recall Tartaglia’s characterisation of the meaning of the question as he sees it:

[T]he question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure; though the form it has acquired has potential to mislead, which some have willingly latched onto. For asking ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leads immediately to a question everyone understands, namely ‘why do human beings exist?’ These questions are distinct because the former presupposes there *is* a reason we exist, in order to consequently ask what ‘meaning’—in the sense of value—this reason provides to human life.<sup>40</sup>

According to Tartaglia, then, the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is equivalent to asking ‘What is the reason we exist?’, where it assumed that, if there *is* such a reason, this would make our lives *meaningful* in the sense of being *valuable*. By parity of logic, then, if there *is* no such value-conferring reason for our existence, our lives would be *meaningless*, in the sense of being *valueless* or *worthless*. By way of further clarification, Tartaglia provides the following, more succinct formulation:

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<sup>38</sup> Mawson (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Even less do I think it is an *ahistorical* question, in the sense of being a question that people have *always asked*, though Tartaglia claims it is, largely on the basis of a rather tendentious interpretation of the epic of Gilgamesh (Tartaglia 2016, pp. 61–3).

<sup>40</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

The question boils down to: what is the value of human life which accounts for us being here? Or less carefully but more naturally: what are we here for?<sup>41</sup>

The first, supposedly more careful way of putting it, seems a little opaque. Unless we assume something along the lines of John Leslie's 'axiarchism,'<sup>42</sup> how could a 'value' account for the existence of the human species? In light of what precedes it, however, I think it is clear that what Tartaglia means to say here—the correct 'careful' formulation of the question—would be this: 'What is the value-conferring reason why the human species exists?'

But this still leaves us with the question of why the *reason* something exists should be supposed to confer a *value* upon it. Clearly, when Tartaglia talks here about the *reason* something exists, he is not talking about what *causes* it to exist in the sense that, for example, we might say such-and-such atmospheric conditions cause clouds or hurricanes to form. What he seems to mean, rather, is that the reason something exists would confer a value on it in the sense that it would be valuable *to* whoever it was that *designed* or *created* it. That this is what Tartaglia has in mind is strongly suggested by the example he uses to illustrate it: computers have a meaning or value, he says, in the sense that 'they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them.'<sup>43</sup> But if this is what Tartaglia means, and if (as he also stipulates) only something that transcends the physical universe, and upon which it depends, could provide life with meaning, then what his question boils down to is simply this: 'Why did God create us?'

I think this clearly *is* what Tartaglia means by the question, and indeed it is only when thus construed that it makes sense to think of the purpose, value and significance of something *as synonymous expressions*. It bears emphasis, however, that this would be the purpose, value and significance that we have *for* whoever or whatever 'created' us. Only in a highly derivative sense would it be *our own* meaning, purpose, significance or value. For the three questions mentioned—about the value, significance and purpose of the human species—only look like the *same* question *from the point of view of God*.

So it appears that what Tartaglia insists is the only 'real' question of the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Leslie (1970).

<sup>43</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.



meaning of life is nothing other than the *theological* question, ‘For what reason did God create human beings?’, where it is assumed that this reason would confer ‘overall meaning’—that is, value, significance and purpose—upon our lives, both collectively and individually. Such an interpretation is further supported by the fact that he says that the very form of the question, “‘what is the meaning of life?’” presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition.’<sup>44</sup>

So now we understand the sense in which Tartaglia thinks that the question is ‘anything but obscure’—or rather, we now know how he thinks what he calls the ‘real’ question *ought* to be interpreted. What we still do not know, however, is *why* he insists that this is the only ‘real’ question, the only truly *philosophical* sense of the question, and why he tells us that this question is ‘as serious as your life.’ I will examine some possible answers to these questions in what follows.

#### 4. Why *This* Question? Why Does It Matter?

Were Tartaglia a theist we could make immediate sense of his doctrinaire insistence upon the particular form of the question that he does. Yet as we already know, from the very title of the book if nothing else, Tartaglia does not think life *has* any meaning: *life is meaningless*—this is what Tartaglia calls ‘nihilism.’ Why then does he maintain, so adamantly and uncompromisingly, that this theological (or crypto-theological) question is the only genuinely *philosophical* meaning the question can have? More than that, why would he contend that this is *the* philosophical question par excellence, the question that defines philosophy’s subject matter, and which philosophers should openly ‘reclaim’ as the very core of their discipline and their principal, motivating concern? What motivates him to regard this question as ‘the keystone of philosophy,’ the question that ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place,’ that without which those preoccupations ‘fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible’?<sup>45</sup> Could Tartaglia’s proposed *answer* to the question provide some essential clues here?

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<sup>44</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 93; cf. p. 95: ‘any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question.’ In Tartaglia (2016), p. 13, he also makes it clear that whenever God is invoked in these debates it’s a sure sign that ‘the traditional question’ is at stake.

<sup>45</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 7.

## 4.1 Rejecting the Premise of the Question

It is important to note that the account I have given above somewhat underplays an essential qualification that Tartaglia makes right at the outset. Having clarified the sense in which he thinks the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ amounts to asking ‘Why do human beings exist?’, where this presupposes that there *is* such a reason and that this reason would confer ‘meaning’ in the sense of ‘value’ upon human life, he writes:

But before you can begin to ask this *philosophically*, you must first ask whether there is any reason we are here at all; which is why the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leaves space for ‘there isn’t one’ as an appropriate response.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, in his article on Metz for the present journal, he writes:

The form of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition. But as with all questions of this form, it leaves room for us to reject its presupposition by appropriately answering that there is no meaning of life.<sup>47</sup>

Why rejecting the presupposition of a theological question should transform it into a ‘philosophical’ question Tartaglia does not say, but rejecting the presupposition of the question is indeed what he does. This is not to say that he *critically examines* this presupposition, however, in the sense of calling into question the assumption that only a value-conferring reason why the human species exists, or a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe, could make human life meaningful. He does not ask, in other words, whether or not it is *a good question*. Nor does he ask whether such a ‘transcendent context’ *could* provide life with meaning.<sup>48</sup> Rather, as we have

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<sup>46</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 1 (emphasis in original).

<sup>47</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> In sections 4.3 and 4.4 I will present reasons for thinking that the answer to this question is negative.

seen, he insists that this is the *only* legitimate philosophical sense of the question. Nor does Tartaglia critically examine any arguments theists have presented for thinking there *might be* such a transcendent reason or context. Indeed, although he argues that philosophers ought to embrace the question of the meaning of life, in the sense outlined above, as their essential motivating concern, he shows no interest whatsoever in any position that does *not* reject the presupposition of the question from the outset. The *only* answer to the question that he calls ‘the keystone of philosophy’ that seems of any interest to him is the purely negative one: there *is* no value-conferring reason why the human species exist. From this Tartaglia infers that *life is meaningless*, and this is supposed to entail that the life of each and every person who has ever lived, or who is alive today, or who will ever live, is *also* meaningless—that is, without value, purpose, or significance. This is what Tartaglia calls ‘the truth of nihilism,’ and he regards it as philosophy’s greatest discovery, the unassailable proof of its ability to make substantial epistemic progress.<sup>49</sup>

While all of this is clear enough, it only makes the issue of *why* Tartaglia thinks this question is such a profound and philosophically significant one all the more baffling. For we have now learnt that the question which he insists is the fundamental motivating concern of philosophy, that which unifies its various branches, and that upon which he pins his hopes for rescuing philosophy from cultural oblivion, is one *whose core presupposition he rejects from the outset*. I will return to the issue of why he rejects this presupposition shortly. First, however, let us briefly examine what he thinks the consequences of rejecting this presupposition ought to be.

#### 4.2 The Consequences of Nihilism: ‘Just act ordinary’

Since Tartaglia maintains that what he calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ is a question of profound significance, a matter of natural and ultimate human concern, and the fundamental question at the root of all philosophy and religion, one might suppose that he would also hold that it ought to be a matter of profound human concern if it turned out that the question itself is based upon a false presupposition—if it turned out, that is, as he argues is the case, that life simply *has* no meaning, value or purpose.

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<sup>49</sup> Tartaglia (2016), pp. 74–8 especially.

But here things get more puzzling still. For Tartaglia tells us throughout the book that it just *doesn't matter* that life has no meaning. Realising 'the truth of nihilism'—that is, that human life is meaningless and worthless—should not be 'expected to change our behaviour in any way,' nor 'to change how we feel about ourselves.'<sup>50</sup> For nihilism, being 'just a neutral fact,'<sup>51</sup> is wholly 'lacking in practical consequences,' and therefore 'realizing the truth of nihilism' should 'be of no relevance within life.'<sup>52</sup> Contrary to those who fear that widespread belief that life is meaningless might be a matter of social and moral concern, Tartaglia asserts that 'there is no reason this belief should affect us practically at all, unless we were previously under the false impression that life has a meaning.'<sup>53</sup>

As for the view that belief in nihilism might 'threaten our commitments' in any way, Tartaglia claims 'there is nothing to it.' After all, 'just because our goals are not imposed from on high, and we realise this,' he writes, 'it does not follow that we cannot commit to them.'<sup>54</sup> Nor should realising the truth of nihilism, and thus embracing the meaninglessness of our existence, in any way affect which activities we choose to prioritise in life. Nihilism 'can have no bearing on such a decision, since its assessment of our activities as ultimately pointless is indiscriminating and uniform.' Nor should acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of our lives make the things we choose to do with our lives *absurd* in any way. For if some activities 'do occasionally strike us as absurd,' he writes, 'this can only be in comparison to others,' since 'there is nothing outside of life' that could make *all* of our activities seem absurd.<sup>55</sup>

It is something of a puzzle that Tartaglia does not think that what goes for

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 175. Such comments (compare that just quoted about 'being under the false impression that life has a meaning') make it quite clear that Tartaglia's book is *not addressed to religious people*. He certainly presents no arguments against theistic beliefs, and I hardly think many people of religious faith are likely to be persuaded by his implicit suggestion that they should realise there is no god and that their lives have no overall meaning, value or purpose when they are bored (pp. 25–34), or if they simply 'retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises' (p. 25; cf. p. 85). That Tartaglia takes atheism for granted in this way means that he fails to think through the veritable 'total world revolution' that universal acceptance of 'the truth of nihilism' would involve, and blinds him to the possibility that a great many conflicts around the world today, not to mention the global resurgence of religious fundamentalism, might have their roots in resistance to and fear of precisely what he calls 'nihilism.' Were he aware of this, at least, I doubt he would treat the issue of the consequences of nihilism with the insouciance that he does.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

absurdity also goes for meaninglessness, for the cases seem entirely analogous. That is to say, if some of our activities sometimes strike us as meaningless, this can only be in comparison with others that we *do* we find meaningful. Thus if there is nothing outside our lives in comparison with which it makes sense to say our lives are *absurd*, for the very same reason there is nothing outside our lives in comparison with which it makes sense to say they are *meaningless* either.<sup>56</sup> Oddly, Tartaglia makes a similar point when he takes issue with Thomas Nagel's suggestion that when we 'step back' from our lives and regard them *sub specie aeternitatis*, our lives seem unimportant. In response Tartaglia says that the assumption 'that only a meaning of life can bestow importance seems both unmotivated and entirely expendable.' 'It seems,' he adds, 'like a leftover religious dogma.'<sup>57</sup> But if this goes for the *importance* of life, why does Tartaglia not draw the same conclusion with regard to the *meaning* of life? Why, in other words, does he conclude from the fact that there is no supernatural or transcendent 'context of meaning' that *our lives are meaningless*? Is this not why Nietzsche called nihilism a 'pathological transitional stage' in which, because faith is lost in a divine guarantor for truth, meaning and value, 'the tremendous generalization' is made, 'the inference *that there is no meaning at all*'?<sup>58</sup>

At any rate, Tartaglia is clear: nihilism ought to have no consequences for our lives. To quote from the opening sentence of the book, the fact that our lives are meaningless is 'just a neutral fact.' It is neither good nor bad, and people who worry about it, or about the consequences which might follow from belief in it, are simply misguided. For even those who *do* believe in God-given meaning, value and purpose—which would include the world's 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, and so on—Tartaglia suggests that all they have to lose is a 'false belief,' along with whatever 'illusory motivations' that belief might have provided.<sup>59</sup> For these reasons, he maintains,

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<sup>56</sup> Thus, to adapt a retort sometimes attributed to Voltaire, the best response to the statement that 'life is meaningless' might be: 'Compared to what?' Tartaglia responds to a similar objection in the fourth section of his second chapter (and even cites the retort just mentioned, albeit in response to the remark that 'Life's a funny thing,' from a 1950s Robert Wise film, in which the line attributed to Voltaire is delivered by Susan Hayward's character, p. 53), but his response essentially boils down to reiterating the idea that human life is meaningless because this meaning is not 'constitutive of what it is to be a human being,' since there is 'no wider context of meaning' (p. 55), and it is precisely these claims that I find most puzzling (as discussed in the next subsection, 4.3).

<sup>57</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche (1883–1888/1968), p. 14 (emphasis in German original).

<sup>59</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 42. With respect to this claim, see n. 54 above.

no ‘coping strategies’ are needed: ‘As you were!,’ seems to be Tartaglia’s considered advice; or, to quote from Chapter 2, tellingly entitled ‘A Survey of Misguided Coping Strategies,’ he writes:

As to the question of what we should do upon realizing the truth of nihilism, then, there may be more than a little relevance in Lin-Chi’s advice to ‘Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down.’<sup>60</sup>

With this we seem to be further than ever from understanding why Tartaglia deems this question to be such a profoundly important one. For if the question is simply based upon a false presupposition, and rejecting it has no consequences for our lives, how *could* it be the ultimate natural concern for human beings? How could such an inconsequential question be the ultimate wellspring of philosophy and religion? Why would it be ‘as serious as your life’? None of this is clear at this point. And things are about to get stranger still.

### 4.3 An Isolated Philosophical Concern

When someone says they think their life is meaningless or worthless, or judges someone else to be living a meaningless or worthless life, we usually take them to be making a social or moral judgement regarding the *value* of that life. Indeed, it is often implied that human lives that are meaningless, worthless, aimless and pointless are lives that are *not worth living*.<sup>61</sup> Yet it turns out that, although Tartaglia maintains that life is meaningless, and although he *does* think this entails that each and every human life is meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant,<sup>62</sup> this does not amount to an *evaluation* of anything—not, at least, in any sense one might readily recognise. He writes as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 44. Further sagely advice from a venerable Zen master is quoted in an accompanying note: ‘In this world we eat, we shit, we sleep and we wake up—and after all that all we have to do is die’ (p. 190 n. 3).

<sup>61</sup> As indeed Tartaglia concedes when he writes that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (ibid., p. 171).

<sup>62</sup> This follows, of course, simply in virtue of the fact that ‘meaning’ is here being treated as synonymous with purpose, value and significance.

To say that life is meaningless *is* to say that it is valueless or worthless; but only in the sense that value is *not essential to what it is*. It is not to say that we are worthless in the *socially contextual* sense that would amount to a condemnation. For although our nature is not *intrinsically valuable*, we value many things, including ourselves. *We might not have done so*, so this value is *not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value*. But our capacity to think about and value anything has made us *contingently valuable*. The philosophical realisation that *value does not flow inevitably from our nature*—a nature which makes value possible—has practically no prospect of reversing this valuation; life is simply too compelling for a philosophical view about the nature of reality to have that kind of effect.<sup>63</sup>

It will be worth pausing to unpack the implications of this, especially with regard to the words I have italicised. For what Tartaglia seems to be saying is that if the value of something is not an *intrinsic property* of that thing—that is, if its value is not something that belongs to the *nature* of that thing *in itself* or *as such*, regardless of its relations to anything else in the world—then it is *without value*, literally *worthless*. The trouble with this is that it is exceptionally difficult to understand what it is supposed to mean, or to think of any examples of anything that could possibly satisfy such a definition of ‘being valuable.’ We usually take the value of something to depend upon it being valued *by* or valuable *for* someone. Something is valuable not *per se* but rather in virtue of being valuable *to* an individual, group, society, or perhaps humans in general.<sup>64</sup> Yet Tartaglia’s implicit strictures regarding *intrinsic* value suggest that anything that depends for its value upon anything other than its own ‘intrinsic nature’ is not *really* valuable at all. For if we were talking about the value of something *to* or *for* someone, even if there were complete unanimity about this value, that would not count as an *intrinsic* value; that is, its value would not be something that belongs to its nature *as the very thing that it is*; its value would not ‘flow inevitably’ from its ‘intrinsic nature.’ Such value would thus not be *real* value,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 6; italics added. See also p. 171 where he claims that ‘the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not.’ Note that he says this even though he is clear that, for him, for life to be meaningless just *is* for it to be worthless; for as he says on the first page of the book, ‘it is “meaning”—in the sense of value’ (p. 1) that is at stake.

<sup>64</sup> I think there is also a perfectly good sense in which things might be said to be valuable to other animal species as well, though it is not a crucial point here.

*intrinsic* value, Tartaglia seems to suggest, but rather only value in some metaphysically second-class, low grade, nickle-plated sense—namely, a ‘socially contextual sense.’<sup>65</sup>

There has of course been a long tradition of philosophers, stretching back to Plato at least, who have debated the question of ‘intrinsic value’ in the context of ethics, where the idea of something valuable ‘in itself,’ ‘for its own sake,’ ‘in its own right’ or ‘as an end in itself’ is typically contrasted with that which is ‘instrumentally valuable,’ or valuable for the sake of something else, or as a means for someone else. For Kant, for example, it is *rational beings* or *persons*, understood as ends-in-themselves, that are the bearers of ultimate, intrinsic or ‘final’ value. All such discussions, however, have traditionally concerned what is intrinsically good or valuable *for human beings* or *in human society*.<sup>66</sup> Once such talk is taken out of the sphere of ethics altogether, however, as Tartaglia has done here, I have serious doubts about whether anything intelligible is being said at all.<sup>67</sup> For what does intrinsic value even *mean* in this case? If, as I have suggested above, it means a property an object would have independently of everything else that exists—or even *whether* anything else exists—I am at a loss to imagine what *could* be valuable in *that* sense. In fact, to employ one of the favourite conceits of contemporary analytic metaphysics, I find that I’m unable to conceive of any such thing *in any possible world*.

Of course, it may be that I simply lack the powers of rational intuition that many proponents of contemporary analytic metaphysics seem to believe they possess: the power, that is, to consult their ‘modal intuitions’ in order to discover what is and is not possible ‘across all possible worlds.’ But if we restrict ourselves to conversing among the mortals for the moment, it seems to me that if *anything* has ‘intrinsic’ value or value ‘in itself,’ ‘for its own sake,’ ‘as such,’ ‘in its own right,’ or however else one might put it—that is, if we can make sense of such a notion at all—I think most people would say that *life on earth*, and perhaps *human life* in particular, is the very best candidate we have. Yet

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<sup>65</sup> When going through a draft of this paper it dawned on me that I’d unwittingly plagiarised Mark Twain’s *Letters from the Earth*, wherein Satan, in his first letter from earth, describes man ‘at his very best’ as ‘a sort of low grade nickel-plated angel’ (Twain 1909/1962, p. 7). It works a whole lot better in its original context, but I decided to leave it in, if only to have an excuse for bringing Twain’s scathingly brilliant and hilarious but much neglected satire to the reader’s attention.

<sup>66</sup> The only reason I say ‘traditionally’ is that more recently such discussions have also been extended to environmental ethics and animal welfare. For a helpful overview see Zimmerman (2015).

<sup>67</sup> Tartaglia makes it clear throughout the book that he does not think the issue ought to have any bearing upon ethics or morality whatsoever.



notice that this is precisely what Tartaglia is telling us *cannot* have any ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘intrinsic worth,’ since this worth is supposedly ‘not essential to what it is’ and ‘does not flow inevitably from our nature.’ But if that is the case, perhaps Tartaglia could provide some examples of what sort of thing *does* or even *could* have ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘necessary’ value in this sense?

A further problem with Tartaglia’s appeal to ‘intrinsic value’ here is that it would seem to violate his own stipulations regarding the necessary conditions for something to count as meaningful or valuable in the first place. For, as we have seen above, Tartaglia makes it clear on the first page of his Introduction that the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life concerns what would confer “‘meaning”—in the sense of value’ upon human life. We also saw that he defines meaning *relationally*. That is to say, Tartaglia holds that for something to have meaning (‘in the sense of value’), there must be a ‘wider context of meaning’ *within which* it would be meaningful or valuable. But if meaning and value necessarily depend upon there being such a wider context—which is something Tartaglia insists upon throughout the book—it is hard to see how he can coherently claim that human life is worthless on the grounds that it is not *intrinsically* valuable, in the sense that this value is not ‘essential to what we are’ and does not ‘flow inevitably’ from our intrinsic nature.<sup>68</sup>

Given that Tartaglia very clearly believes that, if we *had* been created for a reason by a transcendent deity, then our lives *would* be intrinsically meaningful and valuable, the only sense I can make of all this is that he thinks ‘intrinsic value’—*real* meaning, value and purpose—would have to be *divinely bestowed* value. Yet even if one could coherently maintain that intrinsic value could be both *wholly non-relational*—in the sense that it would have to be an essential property of a thing in itself, regardless of the existence of anything else—and at the same time *essentially relational*—in the sense of necessarily depending upon a wider context of meaning—there are still further problems. For one, why would someone who rejects theism or creationism outright, and who finds no reason whatsoever to take it seriously, insist upon such metaphysically inflated, theological notions of meaning, value, purpose and significance in the first place? If Nagel’s suggestion that our lives can seem trivial when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* ‘seems like a leftover religious dogma,’ what are we to make

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<sup>68</sup> I am grateful to Thaddaeus Metz for suggesting that I might make this point more explicit, as well as for sending me a recent paper of his own in which he argues against a relational account of meaning quite similar to that of Tartaglia (see Metz 2015a).

of Tartaglia's conclusion that life is 'meaningless' and 'worthless' on account of the fact that we have no divinely conferred 'intrinsic' meaning and value?<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, even if we *had* been created by a supernatural deity, why would *that* make our lives intrinsically valuable? Is Tartaglia suggesting that, had we been created by Odin or Yahweh or Allah or Zeus, our value *would* 'flow inevitably from our nature' and our lives *would* have intrinsic meaning? If so, to return to Tartaglia's example, does that mean that computers, since they have a meaning or value because 'they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them' also have an intrinsic value that 'flows inevitably' from their nature? After all, they *do* seem to have their value and function 'built-in' and 'externally determined': serving our needs is 'what they are here for.'<sup>70</sup> So are we to conclude that computers, shovels, lawn mowers and tooth picks have 'intrinsic value' whereas human life does not? And yet Tartaglia also suggests that, since it is not metaphysically necessary that we value the things that we do (for we 'might not have done so'), the things that we value do *not* have intrinsic value, for they do not have that value in virtue of being the things that they are. So are we to infer from this that, for something to have intrinsic value, it would not only have to have been created by a supernatural deity, but that it would also have to be *metaphysically necessary* that this deity value it, and could not have done otherwise?<sup>71</sup>

However Tartaglia might go about responding to such objections, we have seen that his thesis that 'life is meaningless' amounts to saying that our lives are meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant, but only in the sense that we have no *metaphysically* 'intrinsic,' 'necessary,' 'essential' or 'constitutive' meaning, value, worth or significance. What this means is that our value 'is not essential to what we are'; that it 'does not flow inevitably from our nature,' and is not 'constitutive of what it is to be a human being,' since there is 'no wider context of meaning'—that is, no supernatural context of meaning beyond the physical universe—that could confer such 'intrinsic' meaning or value upon us.

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<sup>69</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 46. Cf. Nietzsche: '*Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the *realization* that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be "divine" or morality incarnate' (1883–1888/1968, p. 9; emphasis in German original).

<sup>70</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 22.

<sup>71</sup> I am here leaving aside the question of why such deities would not need to have *their* meaning, value and purpose conferred upon them by a wider context also—that is, why Tartaglia's stipulation that something can only have meaning if there is a wider context of meaning does not open up an infinite regress—but I raise it briefly in section 4.4 below.

All of this presumably also explains why, although Tartaglia calls all this ‘just a neutral fact,’ he also suggests that it is no *ordinary* fact, such as ‘the fact that life evolved on Earth.’ It is, rather, what he calls a ‘philosophical fact.’<sup>72</sup> But what on earth, we might well wonder, is one of *those*? Do we have any more of them? If so, what are they, and why are they not more widely known? Is there an encyclopaedia where the complete collection of such putative facts might be consulted? If not, why not? And how are such facts established? In the present case, for example, what kinds of evidence are drawn upon, and what kinds of arguments are employed, in order to establish the special ‘philosophical’ fact that *life is meaningless*?

Disappointingly, perhaps, Tartaglia’s reason for rejecting the possibility that ‘life might have a meaning,’ far from involving any special powers of intellectual intuition or rational insight into what holds necessarily across all possible worlds, comes down to the rather more banal admission that, ‘like many others I can see no good reason to think it does.’<sup>73</sup> Moreover, unlike Metz, for example, who devotes the largest section of his book (comprising no less than four chapters) to critically assessing ‘supernaturalist’ approaches to the question of life’s meaning, Tartaglia does not bother addressing them at all. In view of the fact that Tartaglia reprimands Metz for *neglecting* the issue of whether or not humanity might have been created by a supernatural being, this is a peculiar state of affairs indeed.<sup>74</sup> For if what Tartaglia calls ‘the traditional question’ is nothing other than the question of what meaning God endowed our lives with,<sup>75</sup> and if this is the question Tartaglia exhorts philosophers to publicly embrace as their special area of expertise, one might think he would have some interest in those who have sought to *answer* it rather than just reject its premises from the outset. For even if, as he says, he cannot think of any reasons to suppose it to be true, one might think Tartaglia would at least engage with some of the reasons that *have* been offered, throughout the past two millennia, for thinking it might be. For if there is literally *no good reason* to suppose that any such reason can be found, and if those who think they have found such reasons

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> Tartaglia acknowledges that Metz devotes ‘a large proportion’ of his book to ‘the traditional question’ (2015, p. 95), but this only gets him into more trouble with Tartaglia. Given what Metz had said about the book’s scope in his Introduction (see section 2 above), he is further chastised because he ‘does not even stick to his guns’ (2016a, p. 298). Metz, it seems, as ‘the main culprit’ among the ‘New-Paradigmers’ (ibid. 287–8), is damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t.

<sup>75</sup> Tartaglia (2015), p. 93.

are not even worth engaging with, why would we conclude that our lives are meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant, simply because this rationally unmotivated possibility fails to hold?

It is starting to look like the question of whether life has a meaning in Tartaglia's sense of these words—namely, the question of whether the human species has an overall meaning or purpose—is not very interesting at all; not even for Tartaglia. After all, if there are literally no good reasons for supposing it to be true, and the fact that it is *not* true has no implications for our lives—if it should not 'be expected to change our behaviour in any way,' nor to 'change how we feel about ourselves'—then why all the fanfare about the question in the first place? Why is it supposed to be 'a profound question; a deeply philosophical one'; a question that is 'as serious as your life'?<sup>76</sup>

At the end of his first chapter Tartaglia argues that the entire issue of whether there is an overall meaning or purpose to life ought not to be thought relevant to ethics or morality in any way, and that the rejection of such meaning or purpose should be treated as 'an isolated concern; one relevant to a specific philosophical question.'<sup>77</sup> We have yet to see, however, why it should be of any *philosophical* (rather than theological) concern either. Moreover, if the meaninglessness of life has absolutely no implications for morality or ethics, what becomes of Tartaglia's thesis that the question of the meaning of life is 'the keystone of philosophy,' that which unites its theoretical and practical branches, and that without which it splinters into disparate, unconnected fragments?

Before turning to this question I will briefly take up Tartaglia's most explicit suggestion as to why 'the truth of nihilism' *should* matter to us after all.

#### 4.4. Are Our Lives Meaningless?

Suppose we go along with Tartaglia and allow that to say that something is meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant *in philosophy* or *in metaphysics* is something completely different to what we would mean by those words in any other area of human discourse. Why would such an abstruse, metaphysical, 'neutral fact' regarding so-called 'intrinsic meaning' or 'intrinsic value' be of any interest to anyone?<sup>78</sup> Why would it be a matter of profound

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<sup>76</sup> Tartaglia (2016), pp. 3, 39, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>78</sup> Given what Tartaglia seems to mean by this (see section 4.3), it *would* be a matter of concern to

philosophical and existential importance? In the Introduction to the book Tartaglia anticipates a similar response. He imagines a reader saying that, although she agrees that life has no ‘overall meaning,’ this doesn’t seem very interesting to her—it is, after all, what she had always assumed anyway. This imaginary interlocutor continues:

But then, once you’ve pointed that out, there isn’t really anything more to say, is there? Life is meaningless, and that’s it. It doesn’t lead anywhere interesting, as you’ve effectively conceded yourself: it doesn’t show that life is terrible ... or that anything goes ... or anything like that. So it’s a philosophical dead-end. It’s boring.

Tartaglia responds as follows:

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody’s life is meaningless, and hence that *your* life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.<sup>79</sup>

Tartaglia thus invites each of his readers to reflect on the significance of the fact that their own lives are meaningless. Here I will briefly outline my own response. Though I can only speak for myself, the reason this ‘philosophical fact’ does not strike me as significant is that, as we have seen above, what Tartaglia *means* by this is the following four things: (1) that there is no ‘overall meaning’ to human life; (2) that the human species was not created for a reason by a god or

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many *religious people*, of course. For this reason it is all the more peculiar that Tartaglia does nothing to try to persuade such people that what he calls ‘nihilism’ might be true (cf. n. 54 above).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 7. This is only the first part of Tartaglia’s response. In the second part he claims that, far from it being the case that the question of the meaning of life in his sense ‘doesn’t lead anywhere interesting,’ there is a sense in which ‘it leads everywhere in philosophy.’ It is in this context that he writes that the question of the meaning of life ‘is the keystone of philosophy’ which ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place.’ Although I touch upon these claims in the next section, a proper examination of his arguments for them fall well outside the scope of this paper.

pantheon; (3) that there is no ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe; and (4) that human life does not have any ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysically necessary’ value or purpose. Let me briefly address these in order.

Regarding (1), the idea that there is no ‘overall meaning’ to human life, that the human species has no ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ does not strike me as significant in the least. In fact it just strikes me as confused. As noted in section 1 above, biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have meanings or purposes, any more than a planet could (and no, it doesn’t strike me as philosophically deep or significant that Venus has no ‘overall meaning’ either). Regarding (2), the reason I do not find that significant is simply that I have never in my life supposed that we might have been created by a god—not even a whole team of them. Regarding (3), likewise, I have never entertained the idea that there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ existing somehow ‘beyond the physical universe.’ Indeed, I am not at all sure I know what it means, much less have any idea how we might find out about such a thing even if it did exist. Moreover, even if I were to agree, for the sake of argument, that something can only be made meaningful by a ‘wider context of meaning,’ and that my life could only be meaningful if the physical universe had a meaning somehow bestowed upon it by a supernatural being or ‘transcendent context,’ it seems obvious that this would open up an infinite regress in which nothing could be meaningful anyway, as a matter of plain logic. For even if God had a reason for creating the physical universe, if the only thing that can make a life meaningful is a wider context of meaning, then God’s life too would need to belong to such a wider context, and so on to infinity. If, on the other hand, God does not need any such wider context, then neither do we, and there was never any need to start speculating about a mysterious supernatural or ‘transcendent’ context in the first place. And as for (4), the reason that my putative lack of ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysically necessary’ value doesn’t strike me as significant is that, as I have argued at length in section 4.3, I do not think Tartaglia has provided a sufficiently coherent account of such value for it to make any impact upon me whatsoever.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Regarding Tartaglia’s final point, in the paragraph quoted above, that the thought that one’s life is meaningless ‘resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing,’ while I admit the possibility that I may not have what it takes to ‘genuinely think about it,’ I can only report that I have *tried* to think about it—quite genuinely—and yet, for better or worse, have experienced no such resonance or transfiguration.

## 4.5 The Keystone of Philosophy?

Although I am not persuaded by Tartaglia's reasons for suggesting that I ought to regard the 'intrinsic' meaninglessness of my life as a deeply significant 'philosophical fact,' I am not suggesting that he *should* start taking solipsism seriously. Perhaps, after all, it's just me, and most people would immediately understand the deep significance of all this. Perhaps Tartaglia's distinction between *intrinsic* and *necessary* meaning and value, on the one hand, and *social* and *moral* meaning and value on the other, is intuitively obvious to most people—in which case perhaps *I'm* the one who should consider taking solipsism seriously.

However, this doesn't seem to be what Tartaglia is suggesting either, for he goes on to say that metaphysical meaninglessness and worthlessness and social or moral meaninglessness and worthlessness are 'endlessly conflated in our culture.'<sup>81</sup> Given Tartaglia's earlier insistence upon the obviousness of the true meaning of the question, this is surprising indeed. For if it's the case that the two questions are 'endlessly conflated in our culture,' then people evidently do *not* take the meaning of the question to be obvious in the way that Tartaglia suggests; nor can philosophers be blamed for having deliberately obfuscated the issue. Moreover, it follows that it is not just 'new paradigm' analytic philosophers who are 'very confused' about the meaning of the question.<sup>82</sup> Rather, if the issues are 'endlessly conflated in our culture,' it follows that the confusion is endemic to 'our culture.'<sup>83</sup>

It is for this sort of reason, I take it, that Tartaglia thinks philosophers—not the confused ones, obviously, but the 'real' ones, i.e. those 'good guys' who see the distinction between these issues as clearly and distinctly as does Tartaglia<sup>84</sup>—ought to regain their self-confidence and reassert their voices in the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Since Tartaglia thinks post-Nietzschean philosophers were 'obsessed' with the 'real' question, yet made the issue of 'social meaning' their 'principal concern' (2015, p. 91, 98), it follows that they too must have been 'very confused.' Moreover, since Tartaglia rejects 'the dubious assumption that there is a distinctive concept of social meaningfulness that merits specifically *philosophical* investigation,' it follows that *they* weren't doing genuine philosophy either (2016a, p. 297; italics in original).

<sup>83</sup> Tartaglia doesn't say what 'our culture' includes, so it could be that he thinks this confusion is only a malady of (say) 'Western' culture, and that in some cultures people are rarely if ever guilty of this egregious conflation. If that is the case, however, he doesn't tell us which cultures those might be.

<sup>84</sup> Tartaglia introduces 'the good guys'—that is, 'those philosophers who recognise the clear distinction between the question of the meaning of life and issues about social meaning'—at the end of an Appendix to his Introduction (2016, pp. 18–19). Based on this discussion it would seem that there is

cultural conversation of mankind. And indeed, if humanity is to survive for another few millennia, he suggests, ‘we need a lot more philosophical clarity on these matters.’<sup>85</sup> Such clear-sighted philosophers are needed so that people do not go around conflating intrinsic, necessary, metaphysical meaning, value, purpose and significance with the philosophically uninteresting, extrinsic, contingent, humdrum variety—that is, with what just about everyone else would take these words to mean. (One wonders what other vital services such philosophers might have in store for us befuddled folk.) And yet, apart from any misgivings we might have about metaphysicians bearing gifts of dubious value (to use the latter term in its standard ‘social’ sense rather than Tartaglia’s ‘philosophical’ sense), if the putative confusion is as widespread as Tartaglia suggests, it’s hard to see why he ever insisted that the correctness of his interpretation of the question was ‘a statement of the obvious,’ and berated so many other philosophers for having failed to realise this, in the first place.

In response, Tartaglia might concede the point that it is people in general (at least within ‘our culture’) and not just ‘new paradigm’ analytic philosophers who are ‘very confused’ about what he takes to be the obvious meaning of the question. Indeed, given that people from all walks of life seem to think that things like ‘happiness’ and ‘love’ count as appropriate answers to the question,<sup>86</sup> and given that he says the issues are ‘endlessly conflated in our culture,’ I do not see how he can reasonably deny it. (So much, then, for his arguments about how we typically use the terms, which, even if he can fend off the criticisms offered in section 3 above, turn out to be redundant anyway.) In conceding this, however, he might say that his point all along was not that there was only one *possible* interpretation of the question, but rather that there is only one real *philosophical*

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(or was) only one *really* good guy, apart from Tartaglia himself: namely, the late Milton Munitz. However, in view of the fact that in his book on this issue Munitz himself dismissed the question of the meaning of life in Tartaglia’s sense as a pseudo-problem—‘a mirage and wholly gratuitous’ (Munitz 1993, p. 109)—it looks as though Tartaglia himself may be the *only* really good guy.

<sup>85</sup> See the end of the next footnote for the source of this quotation.

<sup>86</sup> To see the sorts of answers people think it appropriate to give to the question ‘What is the Meaning of Life?’ there is a website called ‘Excellence Reporter’ <excellencereporter.com> comprising more than 700 such answers from people of various walks of life (e.g., writers, artists, architects, monks, scientists, mystics, teachers, etc.). Having read a few dozen of them I can report that I came across not a single one in which the question was taken in anything like the sense Tartaglia claims to be obvious. The first five answers (it is listed alphabetically by surname) are as follows: ‘knowing and being our deepest being’; ‘leaving more behind than you take away’; ‘to do great things that make yourself and others happy’; ‘loving my wife and partner, loving my family and friends, loving the work that I do’; and ‘to find the best version of me every day.’ A recent addition is ‘The Meaning and the Meaninglessness of Life,’ by one James Tartaglia, from which I took the footnote 85 quotation.



interpretation of the question. After all, in the very first paragraph of the book he notes that the question of the meaning of life has picked up a ‘bad reputation’ because ‘there are pathological connotations to obsessing over it.’ This is because worrying about the meaning of life is relatively common among people suffering from depression and other psychological problems. Philosophers, however, should not fear being stigmatised, suggests Tartaglia, since there is nevertheless a legitimate *philosophical* version of the question untainted by any such pathological associations—namely: ‘What is the human species for?’ (or, more colloquially, ‘What are we here for?’).<sup>87</sup> Likewise, in the third paragraph of the book he does not state that there is only *one obvious question* regarding the meaning of life, but rather that ‘there is only one obvious *philosophical* question’ regarding it—and shouldn’t philosophers, at least, be able to tell the difference between a properly *philosophical* question about *intrinsic* or *essential* meaning and value, on the one hand, and a wholly unphilosophical one about mere *personal*, *social* and *moral* meaning and value on the other?<sup>88</sup>

But apart from the implicit suggestion that the questions people suffering from depression might seek answers to are beneath the concerns of philosophy—a suggestion that is simply staggering in light of the fact that Tartaglia claims that people who are bored are able to divine the true answer to the ultimate question of philosophy and religion simply in virtue of having been left to twiddle their thumbs<sup>89</sup>—it is obviously the case that one will *only* agree with this if one *already* agrees with Tartaglia that philosophy is ‘all about’ the question of the meaning of life in his narrow, crypto-theological sense. But since Tartaglia is the *only* philosopher, to the very best of my knowledge, who has

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<sup>87</sup> Tartaglia (2016), pp. 1–2; cf. Tartaglia (2016a), p. 300.

<sup>88</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 2 (*italics added*).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–34. Tartaglia argues that boredom has profound philosophical significance because it is not a mere *mood* or *emotion* but rather something more like what Heidegger called a *Grundstimmung* (see, e.g., Heidegger 1929–30/1995): that is, a fundamental ‘attunement’ that is revelatory of ‘the human condition as a whole,’ allowing us ‘to see things more objectively and grasp truths that would otherwise remain hidden’ (pp. 26, 28). What is ‘most significant about boredom from a philosophical perspective,’ writes Tartaglia, ‘is that it naturally orientates us to the truth of nihilism’; that is, that it ‘attunes’ us to the true answer to the fundamental question of both philosophy and religion—that ‘life is meaningless.’ Should such a philosophical attunement tip over into a mere *mood* such as depression, on the other hand, Tartaglia seems to suggest, asking about the meaning of life thereby loses its deep philosophical significance and becomes a shallow, unphilosophical question with ‘pathological connotations’ (pp. 3, 1). Thus a person who feels her life is meaningless is implicitly asking the merely ‘social,’ wholly unphilosophical question, ‘How can I get some more meaning in my life?,’ to which an appropriate response would be to advise her to get a new hobby or join an internet dating agency (p. 3). Tartaglia takes these points to be obvious, and ‘[u]nlike other philosophers,’ he writes in this connection, ‘I do not scorn the obvious’ (p. 3).

ever characterised philosophy in these terms, and he is well aware that the vast majority of philosophers would disagree with him, all his talk about this being ‘the only obvious philosophical question in the area,’ and his scathing rebukes of other philosophers for failing to see (or else scorning) ‘the obvious’—all of this boils down to little more than Tartaglia feeling disgruntled over the fact that people do not share his highly idiosyncratic conception of philosophy.<sup>90</sup> But then since making the case for the credibility of this conception of philosophy is the principal argumentative burden of Tartaglia’s book, he ought not to have assumed it to be obvious at the outset. Rather, he should have expected to have to *argue* for it, and only expect it to *become* ‘obvious’ to people, if at all, to the extent that his arguments succeed in convincing them. The same goes for his accusation, cited earlier, that those who find the question of the meaning of life ‘obscure, uninteresting or just plain unanswerable’ are purveyors of an ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ and that those who attempt ‘to make philosophy more like science’ are *eo ipso* part of an ‘absurd agenda’ of ‘philosophers turning against philosophy’—in which case, of course, Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant would count not so much as the fathers of modern philosophy as the fathers of modern *anti-philosophy*.<sup>91</sup>

#### 4.6 The Meaning of Life: A Cheap Possibility

Since Tartaglia’s appeal to obviousness does not work, then, his case for claiming that what he calls the ‘real’ question of life’s meaning is the only genuinely philosophical one must hinge on the story he has to tell about the history of philosophy. His historical thesis, in a nutshell, is that philosophy got underway when the question of the meaning of human life was first connected to the concept of ‘transcendence.’<sup>92</sup> It was the prospect that if reality is transcendent there might be ‘a wider context of meaning,’ and thus that nihilism might not be true, that ‘provided the original impetus to philosophical inquiry.’<sup>93</sup> Philosophy thus ‘begins in, and remains rooted in,’ what he calls the ‘two

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<sup>90</sup> To get an idea of just how idiosyncratic it is, consider his claims that (all?) ‘[p]hilosophical problems arise from attempts to make sense of the world with the concepts of transcendence, and such attempts are its proper aim,’ and that the history of philosophy has been a perennial debate between two factions, ‘with one side reminding us of the fact of transcendence only to take it in the wrong direction, and the other side trying to deny it’ (ibid., pp. 178, 180).

<sup>91</sup> I explore this point in some detail in another paper currently in progress.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 73 and chapter 3 *passim*; Tartaglia (2016a).

<sup>93</sup> Tartaglia tells the same story about the origins of religion (2016, e.g., pp. 55, 70, 74, 78).

prototypical concerns’ of the meaning of life and transcendence, and ‘once the connection between them is understood, we have more than enough unity to speak of a distinctive subject-matter of philosophy.’<sup>94</sup> In short, Tartaglia’s principal metaphilosophical thesis is that ‘concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life’ together ‘provide the unifying core to the subject-matter of philosophy’ and provide it with its ‘distinctive subject-matter.’<sup>95</sup>

Apart from the fact that the few historical examples Tartaglia briefly discusses do not really support his case,<sup>96</sup> one might have thought that, if these two questions really *did* form the original impetus and *raison d’être* of traditional philosophical inquiry, historians of philosophy might have taken note of this.<sup>97</sup> But even if we were to accept that the history of philosophy has been in some sense ‘all about’ the question of the meaning of life in Tartaglia’s crypto-theological sense, the trouble is that it follows from other things he says that the entire history of philosophy must have been motivated by a literally irrational, ill-motivated, ‘cheap’ possibility: namely, *the possibility that there is a connection between the question of the meaning of life and the question of transcendence*. For just as he often says he can think of literally ‘no reason’ to think there might be a transcendent context of meaning, so he also says, with regard to the possibility of a connection between transcendence and meaning, that ‘there is no reason to link the two, since there is no reason a transcendent context should be a context of meaning.’ Although the idea that reality might have some ‘overall purpose’ is not ‘conceptually ruled out,’ he writes, ‘we have no good reason to believe in it either’:

For even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 69–70.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 73, 76.

<sup>96</sup> I cannot substantiate this claim here, but attempt to do so in a paper currently in preparation.

<sup>97</sup> Tartaglia does not cite any accounts of the history of philosophy to support his case in the book. However, in a more recent article, by way of pre-empting the objection that ‘philosophy has typically not shown much interest in the meaning of life,’ he cites Julian Young’s *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (2003). That Young’s book might not entirely support Tartaglia’s case, however, is suggested by the statement in its opening paragraph that ‘[f]or most of our Western history we have not talked about the meaning of life’ (p. 1).

<sup>98</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 52 (italics in original).

In light of all that Tartaglia has to say about how philosophy got underway once the question of the meaning of life was connected to the question of transcendence, and how the connection between the two ‘provides the unifying core to the subject matter of philosophy’ and so on, this is quite a bewildering conclusion for him to have embraced. And yet in the final chapter of the book he goes further, letting us know just *how* cheap he thinks this possibility really is. For here we find him arguing that although it is *possible* there could be a connection between the question of the meaning of life and transcendence—the two questions which, again, he has been telling us all along together comprise the ‘unifying core’ of philosophy—this is only an idle or empty conceptual possibility on a par with the possibility ‘that Heidegger’s death was faked and that he lives on as the world’s oldest man; but nobody with any sense would feel the need to rule *that* out. Possibility, as I said before, is cheap.’<sup>99</sup>

So, at the end of the book we find Tartaglia ridiculing and trivialising the question which, at the start of the book, he told us was the most profound and important question a human being can ask; a question that he had told us is ‘as serious as your life’; the ‘keystone of philosophy,’ no less; the question that ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place’ and without which those preoccupations ‘fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible.’<sup>100</sup>

It would seem to follow, then, that the entire history of philosophy and religion—and science, too, inasmuch as it lacked self-consciousness about its proper role and was thus guided by a ‘confused quest’<sup>101</sup>—has been based upon little more than a rationally unmotivated, idle, *cheap* conceptual possibility. And yet Tartaglia implores philosophers to embrace and ‘reclaim’ this same cheap possibility as their own, to officially acknowledge it as the original impetus and unifying core of their discipline, in order to restore philosophy’s self-consciousness and self-confidence, and to re-establish its cultural voice.<sup>102</sup> To steal a line from Tartaglia’s review of Metz’s book: could it be that ‘something has gone wrong’?

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 171 (*italics in original*).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 174 and chapter 8 *passim*.

<sup>102</sup> Tartaglia (2016a).

## 5. Why *this* Question, Again?

So why *is* it, finally, that Tartaglia insists upon the absolute centrality of this question—a question that, as we have seen above, turns out to be not only crypto-theological and scientifically obsolete, but also based upon a possibility that even Tartaglia himself regards as rationally unmotivated, idle, and ‘cheap’? Why would he go to such lengths to argue that the question of the ‘overall meaning’ of human life—understood in the narrow and specific sense of whether there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe—is ‘the keystone of philosophy’? Why would he claim that this question has always been the essential, defining question of philosophy, and that it should remain so today, when he himself rejects the question’s core premise? Why does he insist upon the crucial significance of this question for philosophy’s future when he thinks the answer to it is so obvious, so trivial, so anodyne, and so lacking in consequences that he can simply take it for granted that the reader will agree? Why does he implore philosophers to explicitly embrace this question as their own when he thinks it has long since been definitively resolved, and has no interest in the arguments of those who accept its basic premise? And finally, why does he assert that our lives are ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ simply because there is no reason to believe in an extra-cosmic, supernatural purpose for the universe’s existence? A fully satisfying answer to these questions would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. However, a few things can be said that will help to make ‘overall sense’ of it.

We have seen above that Tartaglia would like to revitalise or reinvigorate philosophy, and help it to ‘regain its own distinctive cultural voice,’ by returning it to what he regards as its roots—that is, to the natural sources of human interest from which it originated, and which continue to draw people to it today. We have also seen that he thinks that this natural source of human interest is best encapsulated by the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, where this is understood to be equivalent to asking ‘What are we here for?’ or ‘Why do human beings exist’? It is because analytic philosophers over the past century or so have ignored, dismissed and even denigrated this question that Tartaglia regards them as part of a ‘tragicomic’ and ‘absurd agenda’ of ‘philosophers turning against philosophy,’ this itself being part of what he sees as a wider

‘anti-philosophical cultural trend.’<sup>103</sup> Such philosophers typically dismiss or disparage the question because it is supposedly ‘obscure, uninteresting, or just plain unanswerable,’ but Tartaglia suspects that the intellectual dominance of science, combined with deeper psychological anxieties regarding religion and nihilism, are what really lie behind this absurd and tragicomic spectacle.<sup>104</sup> But in distancing themselves from the question of the meaning of life, argues Tartaglia, philosophers have distanced themselves not from religion, but from the essential motivating impetus and core subject matter of *philosophy itself*.<sup>105</sup>

To make matters worse, even those philosophers who *have* addressed the question of the meaning of life over the past century have entirely missed the point of the question as properly understood. Instead of addressing the *real* question of the meaning of human life, the question that Tartaglia thinks human beings ‘have been asking since at least the beginning of civilisation’—that is, the ‘deep, natural and ancient question’ of why the human species exists—they have addressed an entirely different question, one that is ‘a relatively recent cultural product,’ and which wholly lacks the philosophical depth, scope and significance of the original. In short, such philosophers have substituted for the venerable question of why the human species exists a question that is not a genuinely *philosophical* question at all: namely, the question of meaning *in* life, or *social* meaning.<sup>106</sup> Such philosophers think that, by ignoring the traditional question of the meaning of life in favour of a wholly distinct set of issues about the conditions of a meaningful life in a social or moral sense, they are bringing philosophy closer to the supposedly more intellectually reputable concerns of science. But Tartaglia thinks this is a fatal mistake. For in trying to align philosophy with what he regards as the wholly incommensurable concerns proper to science, rather than the original motivating concerns he thinks philosophy shares with religion, Tartaglia argues that such philosophers are only helping to drive philosophy itself ever further into cultural oblivion.

Should philosophers follow Tartaglia’s lead in explicitly embracing the question of the meaning of life as the defining core of their discipline, on the other hand, they would be able to carve out an autonomous space for philosophical inquiry entirely un beholden to the misguided metaphysical

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<sup>103</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., e.g., p. 11: ‘In backing away from a meaning of life, then, philosophers have inadvertently been backing away not from religion but from philosophy.’

<sup>106</sup> Tartaglia (2015); (2015a); (2016), chapter 1 *passim*; (2016a).

pretensions of the natural sciences. This would not only make it clear, to both philosophers and others, ‘what philosophy is all about,’ and provide a clear line of demarcation between the concerns of philosophy and those of science; it would also provide philosophy with the kind of self-consciousness and self-confidence it so sorely lacks, thereby enabling it to ‘reclaim its centre,’ ‘regain its own distinctive cultural voice,’ and ‘bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science.’<sup>107</sup>

This much explains why Tartaglia thinks the question of the meaning of life is so important, why he seems so annoyed with much of contemporary philosophy, and with what he calls the ‘new paradigm’ approach to the question of life’s meaning in particular. But why does Tartaglia insist that the question of the meaning of life must be understood in connection with what he calls ‘transcendence,’ such that for our lives to be meaningful ‘there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended’? For Tartaglia is putting it *very* mildly indeed when he says that this ‘might be thought an overly strong requirement,’<sup>108</sup> and I have been suggesting throughout this paper that he has provided nothing in the way of a cogent argument for why the question must be restricted in this way. To say that our lives are meaningless because there is no such ‘transcendent context of meaning’ is gratuitous hyperbole at best. Moreover, we have seen above that even Tartaglia himself regards the possibility of such a context to be a cheap, idle and rationally unmotivated one. So let us ask, one more time: why does he insist upon *this* question?

In order to provide an adequate answer to our question, I think, there is a piece of the puzzle that still needs to be added. For *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* comprises not only a *metaphilosophical* thesis about the nature of philosophy, but also a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of reality itself.<sup>109</sup> Though I have only been able to explore some aspects of the former thesis in this paper, I suspect it is because he wants to forge a connection between these two theses that he insists upon formulating the question of the meaning of life in the way that he does. For, in a nutshell, Tartaglia argues that there *is* a wider

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 9, 7.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>109</sup> Roughly speaking, the first three chapters are devoted to the metaphilosophical thesis indicated by the main title of the book, the next four to the metaphysical one indicated by the subtitle of the book, with the two being brought together in the final chapter, where Tartaglia makes a case for what he thinks the future of philosophy ought to look like in light of the conclusions of the previous chapters.

context of existence beyond the physical universe after all, and that this wider context of existence, upon which the existence of the physical universe depends, is nothing other than *consciousness*.<sup>110</sup> And to cut a long story short, Tartaglia thinks he has found a way to utilise his metaphysical thesis about the transcendence of consciousness to secure an autonomous space for a priori philosophical inquiry and to fortify it against the unwanted incursions of natural science. For within this sheltered space Tartaglia imagines that philosophers might be able to keep consciousness to themselves, to cup their palms around the flame of human essence, as it were, and press on with the fundamental task of philosophy—that of ‘tending the space of transcendence.’<sup>111</sup> Moreover, since the physical universe that is the proper concern of science *has no independent existence* but rather *depends upon consciousness*, it is these philosophers of transcendence who get to have the ultimate say about the true nature of reality.<sup>112</sup> Scientists, on the other hand—as well as philosophical naturalists who misguidedly take the physical universe as the final context of existence—should be persuaded to leave such questions well alone; for not only do they have no expertise in metaphysics, and so make a botched job of it when they try, but since they are guided by a ‘confused quest’ for ultimate meaning that does not exist, they may well end up doing something with disastrous consequences.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 105. This is a *slight* oversimplification in that Tartaglia also maintains that consciousness itself belongs to a *final* context of reality-in-itself. Whether Tartaglia’s premises entitle him to infer that there *is* any transcendent reality apart from consciousness is not a matter I can take up here, but it seems the only reason he introduces it is that he thinks it exculpates him from the charge of idealism.

<sup>111</sup> On the task of philosophy as that of ‘tending the space of transcendence’ see p. 83 and chapter 8 *passim*. I owe the palm-cupping metaphor to Collins (2001), p. 279.

<sup>112</sup> Even if, at Tartaglia also maintains, all they can ever hope to accurately say about it is ‘that it is transcendent’ (see, e.g., pp. 117–120, and p. 163).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 174. One such disastrous consequence—besides the possibility that scientists might recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, discover the elixir of life, or inadvertently invite alien civilisations to invade—would be that they might ‘reverse engineer consciousness’ (ibid.). That Tartaglia thinks this is a real possibility might lead one to question whether he really believes his own story about the extra-physical, transcendent nature of consciousness. For if science *could* reverse engineer consciousness, in the sense of actually *building* creatures whose behaviour would be indistinguishable from that of conscious human beings, how can he maintain that science *can never explain consciousness in physical terms*? Here I suspect Tartaglia would play the ‘zombie card,’ and claim that it would be *metaphysically impossible* for such *merely physical* beings to have *real* consciousness, no matter *how* indistinguishable they might be from *really* conscious beings like ourselves. That philosophers allow their intuitions about what ‘the merely physical’ is capable of do so much of their metaphysical heavy-lifting, and have little more to offer than blatantly circular and question-begging arguments in their defence (‘Imagine you knew everything there is to know about *the physical world*, but...’ or ‘Imagine *the physical world* remains unchanged, but...’), has long baffled me—even if, as I argue in work in progress, such intuitions are perfectly ‘natural,’ and can be explained in terms of the auto-epistemic limitations of our neurocognitive architecture (*inter alia*).



An extra bonus from Tartaglia's point of view is that, when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality, religious and 'spiritual' people turn out to have latched onto a profound insight—for there really is a 'transcendent context of existence,' as they had assumed all along. All they were *wrong* about was their assumption that this context is also a context of *meaning*.<sup>114</sup> However, since philosophy is *all about* transcendence, it follows that religious and spiritual people 'evidence more philosophical acumen' than naturalists and scientists who think they have good reasons for ruling out such a supernatural 'beyond.'<sup>115</sup> For when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality, while religious and spiritual people have been at least *half right*—after all, they *knew all along* that *real* reality was something that *transcends the physical universe*—naturalists and (atheist) scientists, in taking the physical universe to be all that there is, are *altogether wrong*. For as we discover when we arrive at Tartaglia's 'Transcendent Hypothesis,' the entire physical universe turns out to be something that only exists within a 'context of existence' that is *created by consciousness*.<sup>116</sup>

Thus the reason that Tartaglia insists upon the specific form of the question of life's meaning that he does, I would suggest, is not because it makes best sense of the history of Western philosophy (which it doesn't), nor that it explains the origins of the various kinds of religious beliefs people have held throughout history (which it does even less). Rather, it is because he thinks he has found a solution to the problem of consciousness, and hopes that his solution, since it places consciousness *beyond the physical universe altogether*, might also provide the answer to the ultimate question of both philosophy and religion. In particular, he thinks it explains why people all over the world, and throughout human history, have supposed there must be more to the world than physical reality; why they have always supposed that 'true reality' must be *transcendent* in some sense, existing *beyond* the physical world. And the reason it explains this, he thinks, is that it demonstrates *that they were right*.

Unfortunately for Tartaglia's overall thesis, however, the links he manages to forge between the problem of the meaning of life, on the one hand, and the problem of consciousness on the other—even with a whole lot of skilful

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 191 n. 19. He does add a parenthetical '*ceteris paribus*' lest he be taken to be crediting Deepak Chopra or Rick Warren with greater 'philosophical acumen' than Bertrand Russell or W.V.O. Quine. (Though, come to think of it, it may well be that he *would* so credit them.)

<sup>116</sup> Sometimes Tartaglia says that the physical universe 'exists within consciousness' (p. 105), at others that it exists 'within a context created by consciousness' (p. 178).

gerrymandering—are quite tenuous. When one gets to the chapters on consciousness and transcendence, it at least becomes clear why he had insisted upon formulating the question of the meaning of life in the idiosyncratic terms of the possibility that there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe. For Tartaglia’s ‘problem of consciousness’ is a matter of *how consciousness can belong to the physical world*, and since he cannot understand how it *could* belong to it, he concludes that it *doesn’t* belong there at all. Rather, it *transcends* the physical world. And yet since the physical world *presents itself within* consciousness, and since consciousness cannot possibly exist *within the world that it presents*, it follows that the physical world itself must exist in some sense *within* consciousness. To believe that consciousness depends upon the brain within the world it presents in waking life, argues Tartaglia, would be as absurd as to suppose that it belongs to the brain within the world it presents in a dream. The sense in which the physical world exists within consciousness, then, is the same as the sense in which the world of a dream exists within consciousness: it is a ‘context of existence’ which consciousness *creates*. Consciousness itself, on the other hand, belongs to a transcendent context of existence that is *not* created by consciousness, but is rather the final, ultimate context of reality-in-itself. So, if people have always believed in a reality that transcends the physical world, and if the ultimate, founding question of both philosophy and religion is the question of the meaning of life, where this is understood in terms of the possibility that there might be a transcendent context of reality that would provide a reason for the existence of the universe, and thereby also a meaning to human existence, could it be that Tartaglia has solved the ultimate problem of both philosophy and religion—the most profound question of natural human concern?<sup>117</sup>

Well, I expect this at least clarifies how the two issues are supposed to be connected, and I suggest that this goes a long way towards explaining why Tartaglia insists upon the form of the question of the meaning of life that he does. For any such metaphysically audacious hypotheses as these, of course, the hazards are myriad and the hurdles gargantuan. Indeed, the puzzles to which Tartaglia’s proposed *solution* to the problem of consciousness gives rise make the problem itself look altogether simple by comparison. To restrict myself here to the issue of how Tartaglia attempts to forge the aforementioned connections,

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<sup>117</sup> On all this see chapters 4 and 5 especially.

we can already discern several loose threads that might unravel the fabric of the would-be system. For although Tartaglia claims that the question of consciousness is motivated by the question of transcendence, he does not in fact formulate the question in these terms at all. Rather, what he calls ‘transcendence’ is his *answer* to the problem of consciousness, a problem which he formulates on quite other grounds: namely, as mentioned above, in terms of the question of how consciousness could ‘belong to’ the physical world.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, although he claims that his ‘Transcendent Hypothesis’ denies that there is a ‘transcendent context of meaning,’ and, in thus revealing the truth of nihilism, ‘reveals that one important source of psychological need for meaning is a straightforward mistake,’<sup>119</sup> the hypothesis in question, to the extent that it is not simply orthogonal to these issues, would seem rather to favour the idea that there *is* a transcendent context of meaning. For if it were indeed the case, as Tartaglia’s hypothesis would have it, that our consciousness *creates the physical world*, it is hard to see how this could *fail* to make our lives meaningful—for it would seem to make us gods, and each human mind a kind of demiurge. Moreover, since Tartaglia endorses Einstein’s view that without consciousness the entire universe would be ‘nothing but a pile of dirt,’<sup>120</sup> it seems he is committed to saying that consciousness is not only the ‘transcendent context’ within which the universe exists, but also *the transcendent source of all meaning and value*. Why then, we might wonder, is *consciousness itself* not a ‘transcendent context of meaning’?<sup>121</sup> And to these two problems one could easily add dozens of others no less serious; some considerably more so.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 83ff.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 170, 171.

<sup>120</sup> As reported by Feigl (1967), p. 138; cited by Tartaglia (2016), p. 85. Feigl tells us that the German word Einstein actually used was more ‘uncouth’ than the English word ‘dirt.’

<sup>121</sup> Far from recognising any such implication, Tartaglia’s official position is that realising that the physical universe depends upon and exists within our own minds does not and cannot even ‘put human life in a new perspective’ (see, e.g., pp. 170, 172). Rather, he thinks that realising that the physical universe is ‘not an independent being’ but rather ‘exists within a context created by consciousness’ ought to lead to ‘a relative quietism on ontological issues’ (p. 178). He also denies that his position amounts to any kind of idealism, but in view of his claims that the physical universe ‘exists within consciousness’ (p. 105), that the ‘world of physical things, like electrons, tables, and planets’ is only a ‘representational posit’ (pp. 165–6), and that consciousness ‘is not dependent on the brain’ (p. 113), I do not find his denials altogether convincing.

<sup>122</sup> I intend to address some of these problems, especially with regard to Tartaglia’s proposed solution to the problem of consciousness, elsewhere. It may be worth adding here that a deeper reason why Tartaglia links the problems of consciousness and the meaning of life may be that he apparently thinks both nihilism and the transcendence of consciousness become obvious if we simply reflect upon what a *wholly physical reality* would be like. Thus he says that the ‘quickest and easiest way’ to see the truth

## 6. Conclusion

It is often said that in philosophy it is more important to ask the right questions than to arrive at the right answers, and though I have found much to take issue with regarding to Tartaglia's way of construing the question of the meaning of life, I do think he has raised important metaphilosophical issues that philosophers all too rarely address. Indeed, I even think there is *something* to the suggestion that philosophy has its origins in questions regarding 'the meaning of life'—at least if that is construed in a suitably broad sense. For many philosophical questions are indeed deeply rooted in natural sources of human curiosity about the world, and about the place of human beings within it. It is also true that human beings have always tried to make sense of things by placing their lives within a larger context, narrative, worldview or explanatory framework. Thus, if we allow that in searching for the 'overall meaning' of life people might be seeking to place their lives, and by extension human life as whole, within a broader context or explanatory framework—a framework within which to make sense of the world as a whole, and of their own place within it—then I think Tartaglia is quite right: the question of the meaning of human life, *in this maximally broad sense*, is indeed a matter of profound human concern, wonder and curiosity. Throughout human history such overarching explanatory frameworks have taken a wide variety of different forms. From the fabulous mythological narratives of our prehistoric ancestors through the simple anthropomorphic cosmologies of the world religions to the breathtakingly sophisticated 'theories of everything' of contemporary theoretical physics and cosmology, the human urge for global or all-embracing explanation and understanding is undeniable. Also undeniable is that many of philosophy's perennial problems have their roots in this drive to make maximal sense of the world. Indeed, it is this aspiration for all-encompassing explanation and understanding that is so well captured by Wilfrid Sellars's characterisation of the aim of philosophy as that of understanding 'how things in the broadest possible

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of nihilism is 'to retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises' (p. 25). As it turns out, this is also essentially the *same* route whereby he arrives at the conclusion that consciousness cannot 'belong to the physical world' (see pp. 83–85 especially). It would therefore appear that both Tartaglia's nihilism and his 'Transcendent Hypothesis' rest upon his conviction that the physical universe is a *zombie universe*, in the sense popularised by David Chalmers. That this conviction is supported by little more than a hopelessly impoverished conception of 'the physical' is a claim I defend at length in work currently in progress.

sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’—a characterisation of philosophy that I have long favoured.<sup>123</sup>

Where I disagree with Tartaglia is that I see no reason to tether this natural human curiosity and drive for explanation to any particular question about a value-conferring reason for our existence, much less to any supposed natural yearning for a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe, one that might ward off the threat of nihilism and provide human life with value and purpose. Even as a hypothesis about the origins of Western philosophy, this does not withstand serious scrutiny, and it is even less credible with regard to the origins of the world’s religions. Moreover, if we interpret the question of ‘the meaning of life’ in the broader sense I have sketched above—that is, in terms of the search for an all-inclusive context, narrative, worldview, or explanatory framework within which to ‘make sense of things’ in the broadest possible sense of these terms—we could avoid several problems with which Tartaglia’s interpretation of the question would seem to be hampered. First, we would respect the original linguistic form of the question, and use the expression ‘meaning of *x*’ in the way that I have suggested it is most commonly used, without having to substitute ‘value,’ ‘purpose’ or ‘significance’ in its place, as if these were all synonymous. This would have the added advantage that overall *meaning* would not be confused, as is the case with Tartaglia’s construal of the question, with distinct concerns regarding *value*.<sup>124</sup> Second, the question would not only be asking (*inter alia*) about our *origins* (‘Why are we here?’), but also about our *fate* (‘Where are we heading?’), both in terms of our individual lives and the human species itself. These are questions that surely *have* always been central to the human quest for meaning, yet ones that Tartaglia’s formulation of the question would appear to sideline—and even, at times, trivialise.<sup>125</sup> Third,

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<sup>123</sup> Sellars (1963), p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Though Tartaglia claims that the conflation of *social* meaning and value with *intrinsic* meaning and value is a ‘straightforward mistake,’ he also says, as we have seen, that *life is worthless* and admits that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (2016, p. 171). On my alternative construal of the question, however, there would be no need to insist upon a dubiously coherent metaphysical distinction between ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘social value,’ one that is ‘endlessly conflated in our culture’ and which people would need to take courses in Tartaglian metaphysics to understand, since life’s ‘overall meaning’ would not be synonymous with its value in *any* sense of the word.

<sup>125</sup> Although Tartaglia does talk about death in the context of his discussion of time in chapter 6, in the earlier chapters where he formulates his ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, it scarcely figures. Unlike boredom, which Tartaglia tells us is a profound philosophical significance to the question of the meaning of life, he tells us in a note to his Introduction that ‘fear of death’—which one might think even *more* relevant to the question—‘does not impress me: “whaddya gonna do?,”’ as Tony Soprano

there would be no reason to restrict the range of possible *answers* to the question to those that make a rationally and empirically unmotivated appeal to a supernatural being beyond the physical universe, thereby leaving us with a stark and unappealing choice between either theism or nihilism. Rather, we would see that the physical universe itself is a context within which we can make sense of our lives—where we have come from, where we might be heading, and where we *ought* to be heading—based upon genuine (albeit defeasible) knowledge rather than the divisive dogmas of irrationally held belief (or ‘faith’). And finally, we would also have no reason to say that human life is ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ on the dubiously coherent, crypto-theological grounds that we have no ‘intrinsic value,’ where this would mean something like ‘divinely bestowed’ or ‘God-given’ value.

Of course, it could be that Tartaglia simply *likes the sound of* the idea that everybody’s life is meaningless and worthless, just as he tells us that he describes himself as a nihilist because ‘I like the sound of it.’<sup>126</sup> However, given that more than 800,000 people end their own lives every year (which works out as about one suicide every 40 seconds), and that one of the most frequently cited reasons they do so is that they feel their lives are meaningless and worthless, Tartaglia might want to think twice about the wisdom of being seen to lend intellectual legitimacy and academic respectability to this sentiment. Tartaglia would qualify this, of course, as he does in his book, by saying that this is no sense an *evaluation*, and that he is talking about *metaphysically necessary, essential and intrinsic* value, not mere ‘social value,’ or value in any ‘socially contextual sense.’<sup>127</sup> But even if Tartaglia can show that this distinction is coherent and important, if he wants people to construe the question of the meaning of life in the way he does, on the grounds that this is supposedly *what the words mean*, or *how they are typically used*—that is, if he still wants to maintain this in the teeth of the many objections raised above—then he ought also to take into account what the words *meaningless* and *worthless* mean, and how *they* are typically used. For however much he might go on to qualify his message that people’s lives are meaningless and worthless with talk of the supposedly irreducible difference between ‘intrinsic’ value, on the one hand, and

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would say’ (p. 185 n. 11).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 7. Apart from his day job as a professional philosopher, Tartaglia is also an exceptionally talented jazz musician. However, I would urge him not to allow his aesthetic tastes (i.e., what he ‘likes the sound of’) to guide his metaphysical commitments.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., e.g., pp. 6, 56, 171, and the discussion in section 4.3 above.

‘social’ value on the other, from the point of view of ordinary language this is simply irrelevant. For from the point of view of how these words are used in *all* domains of life (beyond, perhaps, a few scattered philosophy seminar rooms), to say that a person’s life is ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ simply *is* to condemn their lives—it is to condemn them as *not worth living*.<sup>128</sup> And if philosophy is to ‘regain its own distinctive voice,’ I hardly think that this is the message it ought to be conveying as the culmination of more than two and a half millennia of philosophical wisdom—even if Tartaglia does regard it as philosophy’s greatest triumph.<sup>129</sup>

In response to this last point, Tartaglia might argue, as he does in the book, that even if widespread belief that life is meaningless and worthless *were* to have ruinous social, moral or psychological consequences, nihilism can hardly be held to blame. After all, nihilism is ‘just a neutral fact,’ and regardless of what the consequences might turn out to be if everyone came to realise the truth, it is no less *true* for all that. For it is still *a fact*, and a profoundly significant one to boot.<sup>130</sup> But nihilism, in Tartaglia’s sense, is not a ‘fact’ at all, not even a ‘philosophical fact.’ To say that human life, including the lives of each and every individual human being, is *meaningless* and *worthless* because there is no supernatural ‘context of meaning’ is gratuitous hyperbole at best. It no more follows from the fact that there is no divinely preordained ‘meaning of life’ that *life is meaningless* than it follows from the fact that there is no divinely preordained morality that there can be *no morality at all*. To declare that life is meaningless and worthless on these grounds is nothing other than what Nietzsche called a ‘pathological inference’ from loss of belief in an ideal ‘transcendent’ world existing somehow ‘beyond the physical universe,’ a belief which entails devaluation of *this* world as ‘merely physical.’<sup>131</sup> This is the sort of ‘ideal world’ that today’s so-called ‘religious martyrs’ or ‘suicide bombers’ are hoping to escape to when they trigger their ‘sacred explosions’ in crowded public places. But then if this life is truly meaningless, worthless and insignificant; if ‘the life of this world,’ as the Qur’an has it, ‘is nothing but a fleeting vanity,’ ‘a sport and a pastime,’ ‘a show and an empty boast,’ and if

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<sup>128</sup> Again, Tartaglia readily concedes this when he says that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (ibid., p. 171).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., e.g., pp. 74–76.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>131</sup> Nietzsche (1883–1888/1968), pp. 9, 11, 14, 35 and *passim*.

eternal paradise awaits the martyr in the hereafter, who can blame them?<sup>132</sup> Given this, and the suicide rates mentioned above, would it really be such a good idea for philosophers to publicly embrace ‘the question of the meaning of life’ as their special domain of expertise, and then, having had their self-confidence and distinctive cultural voice restored, declare that life is indeed ‘meaningless,’ ‘worthless’ and ‘insignificant’?

Nihilism, then, understood as the ‘philosophical fact’ that all human life is meaningless, worthless, aimless and insignificant is not a ‘useful label’ for ‘an important philosophical position,’ as Tartaglia would have it. It is, rather, as his imaginary interlocutor puts it, ‘a philosophical dead-end.’ Indeed, even this may be giving it too much credit. For just as Tartaglia says that questions regarding ‘social meaning’ and the meaningfulness of people’s individual lives ‘do not strike me as terribly philosophical,’ so do I fail to find much that is of philosophical (rather than *theological*) significance in his ‘real’ question of the meaning of life.<sup>133</sup> For if philosophy aims to understand ‘how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,’ the broadest possible context we have, and ever *will* have, is that of the physical universe.<sup>134</sup> And contrary to Tartaglia’s claim that only a supernatural or ‘transcendent’ context could bestow ‘overall meaning’ upon human life, it seems to me that placing our lives in the context of human history, human history in the context of the evolution of life on earth, and life on earth in the context of cosmological evolution, can provide considerable meaning to our lives, both individually and collectively. For we thereby come to understand our real origins, and our intimate biological kinship with all living things on earth.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> See, e.g., Qur’an 2: 86, 190–3, 212, 216; 3: 167–9, 195–8; 4: 74, 95; 6: 32, 70; 7: 51; 9: 38–9, 73, 81, 85–9, 111; 10: 7–8; 11: 15–6; 13: 26; 14: 3; 16: 107–9; 17: 18–9; 22: 58–60; 29: 64; 40: 39; 42: 36; 47: 36; 57: 20; 76: 27; 79: 38–39. Such lines as those quoted here are a frequent refrain in the Qur’an, which is clear that only unbelievers rejoice in this life (and that they will suffer eternal torture for it in hellfire). I have quoted here from Dawood’s translation (1990): see, e.g., pp. 58, 283, 359, 382–3.

<sup>133</sup> Tartaglia (2016), pp. 7, 4.

<sup>134</sup> I say this notwithstanding the fact that Tartaglia takes himself to have established, in the space of eight short paragraphs of a priori reasoning, that consciousness transcends the physical universe (ibid., pp. 83–85). Regarding the definite article here (‘*the* physical universe’) I do not mean to rule out ‘multiverse’ hypotheses in contemporary cosmology, nor Everettian interpretations of quantum mechanics. Rather, I am using the term ‘universe’ in its maximally inclusive sense, such that if it turns out that what we now call ‘the universe’ is only one among many, these too would count as part of ‘the universe’ in the relevant sense. As for my contention that we *never will* have a broader context than the physical universe within which to make sense of things, this should be taken as a hypothesis or prediction strongly supported by enumerative induction over the history of science (cf. Melnyk 2003, pp. 256ff).

<sup>135</sup> On the truly surprising extent of this kinship see, e.g., Carroll (2005).



We also come to learn that we are, in a sense, ‘special’ after all. We are special in that the Earth is very far from being a typical part of space, or even a typical sort of planet. Rather, it is an extraordinarily rich and multifarious planet, upon which that most curious of all things—life itself—has evolved and proliferated. For whether one regards life as a blessing or a curse, a gift for which to be thankful or a condition to be endured, there can be little doubting its remarkable *scarcity* in the universe at large.<sup>136</sup> And we human beings, though only one among many species of animal life, are also special—not least in that we have evolved the ability to collaboratively develop, refine and expand our knowledge, and to provide empirically supported answers to questions about the universe as a whole, and our place within it. Whether one prefers to think of this in terms of ‘the universe coming to know itself through man,’ or in less metaphysically inflated terms, it is quite capable of providing ‘overall meaning’ to our lives.

We also come to learn, of course, that we are finite—that, to quote Bertrand Russell, ‘no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave’—but that this too can make our lives *more* rather than less meaningful. For we thereby come to realise that *this* life is the only one we have, or ever will have, and that there is no *other* life with respect to which it even *makes sense* to say that *this* one is ‘meaningless’ or ‘worthless.’ We come to learn likewise that we humans are but one among countless millions of biological species, and that we too, like so many before us, will ultimately be faced with annihilation—‘that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction...’ Indeed, in view of the many existential threats or ‘global catastrophic risks’ already looming on the horizon—many of them, of course, anthropogenic in origin—it seems increasingly likely that we will be forced to confront this possibility sooner rather than later; if not in the present century, at least a whole lot sooner than Russell’s ‘vast death of the solar system.’<sup>137</sup> But just as we can do things to try to ward off an early death, and to extend our individual lives, so too can we face up to the threats that face our species, and the many species with which we still share the planet, and arrive at rational, scientifically informed decisions about how best to respond to them.

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<sup>136</sup> Regarding the distribution of planets in space this is unassailable (cf. Deutsch 2011, pp. 42ff.). Regarding the probable distribution of complex life on other planets it also remains the default position in astrobiology and evolutionary biology (see, e.g., Davies 2010 and Lane 2015). For a robust and philosophically sophisticated challenge to the conventional wisdom see Ćirković (2012).

<sup>137</sup> Russell (1917), p. 41. See, e.g., Bostrom & Ćirković (2008) and Bostrom (2013).

Such a naturalistic perspective on the meaning of life is unlikely to provide the kind of comfort that many people desire, or else have learnt to take for granted; the kind of comfort an infant might feel in knowing that a benevolent parent is watching out for them and will protect them come what may. And for those who think of the meaning of life as a kind of story—and this includes the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived—the ending may provide little solace or consolation of the kind that religions have traditionally provided. But the meaning of life we are talking about here is, at the end of the day, the only kind worth having; for it is the kind that is based upon genuine knowledge rather than myth, superstition, or wishful fantasy.<sup>138</sup> And notwithstanding Tartaglia's intuitions and arguments to the contrary, the physical universe not only provides a fathomlessly rich and endlessly fascinating context within which to make sense of our lives, but—as I intend to argue in future publications—it also readily accommodates human consciousness.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Just prior to sending this paper off for publication, upon belatedly remembering to cite Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* in note 3, I realised that I may well have been 'unconsciously channelling' a line from that book in this sentence (cf. Dennett 1995, p. p. 22). What alerted me to this was Dennett's subtitle, which I had completely forgotten: *Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. The first reference to the meaning of life in the Index (p. 571) directed me to page 22, where I read: 'the only meaning of life worth caring about is one that can withstand our best efforts to examine it.'

<sup>139</sup> Many thanks to Ray Brassier and Thaddaeus Metz for reading an earlier draft of this paper and making some valuable suggestions for amendments. Had I been able to carry out radical amputative and reconstructive surgery of the kind Ray recommended, I have no doubt it would have been a whole lot better, and considerably more succinct. To paraphrase a quote variously attributed to Blaise Pascal, Mark Twain, and Winston Churchill, among others: if only I'd had more time I would have written something shorter. I would also like to sincerely thank the editor of the journal, Professor Masahiro Morioka, for accepting such a long paper for publication. I dedicate the paper in gratitude to James Tartaglia for recommending me as a contributor to this symposium, in spite of the fact that he was well aware of how strongly I disagreed with his views. This, it seems to me, betrays the sort of character and magnanimity to which any would-be philosopher ought to aspire. Ironically, perhaps, this invitation has helped to restore some meaning and purpose to my own life after several years of ill-health, unemployment, and freelance editorial drudgery. Unrelenting criticism may seem a discourteous way to show one's gratitude, but I trust James will understand what drives me, and accept the paper in the spirit it was written—one best captured by an ancient saying attributed to Aristotle: *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*.

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## Reply to Damian Veal

James Tartaglia\*

Damian Veal's paper has a clear overall narrative: it takes the form of an investigation into why I ask the question of the meaning of life, despite the fact that I do not think there is one, and why I insist upon (Veal's context) or argue (the book's context, I maintain) that this question is central to philosophical inquiry. This is presented as a mystery, the solution to which requires a painstaking assemblage of all the clues. In the penultimate section, entitled, 'Why *this* Question, again?', Veal announces the result of his investigation. Here is what he says:

In order to provide an adequate answer to our question, I think, there is a piece of the puzzle that still needs to be added. For *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* comprises not only a *metaphilosophical* thesis about the nature of philosophy, but also a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of reality itself. Though I have only been able to explore some aspects of the former thesis in this paper, I suspect it is because he wants to forge a connection between these two theses that he insists upon formulating the question of the meaning of life in the way that he does. For, in a nutshell, Tartaglia argues that there is a wider context of existence beyond the physical universe after all, and that this wider context of existence, upon which the existence of the physical universe depends, is nothing other than *consciousness*. And to cut a long story short, Tartaglia thinks he has found a way to utilise his metaphysical thesis about the transcendence of consciousness to secure an autonomous space for a priori philosophical inquiry and to fortify it against the unwanted incursions of natural science. (pp. 246-7)

This is the culmination of his narrative. Afterwards, there is no time for him to say where I went wrong (I engaged in a 'whole lot of skilful gerrymandering' (pp.

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248-9)), and so he instead proceeds to allow his criticisms to become quite extreme, thankfully only for a short while, before finally providing his own, positive take on the question of the meaning of life; a question hitherto disparaged at every step. Veal's main investigation was successful, however, because I did indeed write a book which connects the question of the meaning of life with a thesis about consciousness and the nature of philosophy. The final chapter is called 'Nihilism, Transcendence and Philosophy'; 'Nihilism' is my answer to the meaning of life question, and 'Transcendence' pertains to my accounts of consciousness and the nature of philosophy. But I did not save this connection for the last chapter. Rather I said exactly what I was going to do in the introduction, and then proceeded to argue for my position throughout the book. So I can only conclude that the investigative narrative of Veal's paper is really just a dramatic device, employed to allow him to hold the whole of my book up to the incredulous, disapproving stares which he seems to imagine whenever he quotes me; which is a lot.

Still, I think I can see his underlying concern. Veal thinks the question of the meaning of life is ambiguous and can be interpreted in many different ways. He thinks I have chosen a particular interpretation simply because it ties in with my account of consciousness; and that this is not a good reason for side-lining alternative interpretations. I, for my part, think that my interpretation is independently plausible. I take it to be the most natural interpretation of the question, whatever metaphysical commitments you might hold, and find aversion to this interpretation a reasonable cause for suspicion. If I were a physicalist, I would still interpret the question this way, look for a wider context than human society from which the existence and value of human life could be explained, find none, and conclude both that nihilism is true and that the question arose because people suspected that there was a transcendent context capable of delivering a positive answer to the question. My conclusion would still have been that this interpretation of the question has been avoided because nihilism has mistakenly been thought of as a negative evaluation, due to theological assumptions. As it is, however, my account of consciousness leads me to believe that reality does in fact transcend our physical conception of it. So seeing this connection between the question of the meaning of life and consciousness, these accounts became mutually reinforcing. The connection does not motivate my interpretation of the question; rather it provides a better explanation of why that interpretation has been avoided, and one which is revealing about the nature of philosophy.

Although the passage I quoted above does capture the broad aims of my book, it nevertheless contains two important misrepresentations of my position; so given that I have now quoted it, I shall point out what they are. The first is where Veal says, ‘this wider context of existence, upon which the existence of the physical universe depends, is nothing other than *consciousness*’. I explicitly deny this; I say that it depends on the final context, which *cannot* be a context of consciousness. Veal knows this, because he immediately adds a footnote saying that this is a ‘*slight oversimplification*’ (p. 247; his emphasis); but that he has no time to explain why my position ultimately collapses into the one he presents. The second misrepresentation is when Veal says that I want to, ‘utilise [my] metaphysical thesis about the transcendence of consciousness to secure an autonomous space for a priori philosophical inquiry and to fortify it against the unwanted incursions of natural science’. This is misleading, because although I think the recognition of transcendence goes a long way towards revealing the relatively autonomous space in which philosophical inquiry takes place, Veal is suggesting that I am trying to insulate philosophy because I am afraid natural science can do a better job on the same tasks. Rather, I argue against the philosophy of physicalism because I think science and philosophy have very different tasks. The only ‘unwanted incursions’ in question are from scientists who engage with philosophical questions while simultaneously disparaging philosophy.

Veal begins his paper by telling us that anyone who knows some science knows that a biological species is not the kind of thing which could have an overall meaning. Since humans are a biological species, then, the question of the meaning of life, as I present it, is nonsensical; an alternative conclusion, which Veal overlooks, would be that nihilism is necessarily true. There are two reasons why neither of these options can be right. The first is that just because science has a way of talking about our lives according to which the question of overall meaning does not naturally arise, it does not follow that it cannot arise; for scientific discourse occurs in the wider context of life. In talking about water scientifically, issues about taste may never arise, but we are still talking about something for which such issues do arise; as can be seen from the fact that, given how well known this example has become, people can talk about ‘the taste of this H<sub>2</sub>O’ and be readily understood. The second reason is that if the question really were nonsensical, then it would be impossible for reality to be such that either a positive or negative answer to it was true. Nihilism may be false, just as positive accounts,



according to which human life exists within a context of meaning, may be false; but we have no reason to think that these positions are necessarily false, simply in virtue of the concepts involved, *unless* an argument can be provided to show that formulating them involves a contradiction.

If Veal had an argument of this kind, to support his claim that, ‘we have long since known that biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have “overall meanings” or purposes’ (p. 209), then the rest of the paper would have been unnecessary. Instead, he soon backtracks to the claim that it makes ‘dubious sense at best to ask about the overall meaning of a biological species’ (p. 218). He is not sure whether it makes sense, then, but proceeding on the assumption that it does, he asks why I made sense of it the way I did. He thinks I should have followed the consensus of saying that the question is very obscure, as ‘a prelude to getting clear about the variety of ways it can be, has been, and might legitimately be construed’ (p. 214). He thinks that unlike other philosophers, I neglect the project of conceptual analysis (p. 215).

I provided an analysis of the question according to which it has two components; an existential component concerning the reason we exist, and an evaluative component about that reason. I argued that if nihilism is true, it cannot be an evaluative fact. I then proceeded to distinguish four different senses of social meaning / meaning *in* life, showing how two of these senses have been the focus of recent debates, and that a failure to distinguish them both from each other, and from the sense in which life itself might have a meaning, has led philosophers to argue at cross-purposes and draw conclusions about the meaning of life from premises about social meaning. I argued that there are also two senses of seeming meaningfulness, namely as manifest but defeasible conscious presentation and as judgement, and that inattention to this distinction undermines the most popular approach to social meaning in the debate, namely the combined subjective-objective account. All of this transpires in the introduction, which Veal quotes more than any other part of the book – but you would never guess from his paper.

In the book, I claim that the reason the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ has acquired the iconic status it has within our culture, is that it is a natural question which people have always asked and probably always will. This is a disconcerting question to ask for those without religious faith, given the negative connotations of nihilism (which I reject); and so I make the case that since recent philosophy has wanted to align itself with science, philosophers have tried to reinterpret the question in terms of social meaning. Through a combination of

these factors and others, two ideas have acquired currency both inside and outside philosophy, namely that the question is obscure and that it can be answered with an account of social meaning. As a naturalist / physicalist, Veal objects to me saying things like this. I should not have made such claims without firm empirical evidence, and it was arrogant of me to suggest that I have seen something others have overlooked. From the comfort of my armchair, as he thinks of it, I alighted on this particular interpretation of the question of the meaning of life, and ran with it because it allowed me to make a connection to consciousness, which I saw as the best defence old-fashioned metaphysics still has against the encroachments of science into its traditional territory.

As I see it, however, I was simply trying to do some original philosophical thinking. If you agree with the consensus on a topic, then that option is not open to you; but the consensus I discovered when I looked into what philosophers were currently saying about the meaning of life did not seem right to me. So I thought about it and said what did seem right to me, trying to make my case as convincingly as I could, and trying to connect what I now thought about this topic, with other issues I had been thinking about for years. One thing that struck me was that neither the question of the nature of philosophy nor the question of the meaning of life had received much attention in recent philosophy; which seemed odd. However, I knew that there had been considerable and sustained opposition to physicalist accounts of consciousness, so I was not alone there, at least. I came to the conclusion that it was physicalism that had relegated the question of the nature of philosophy to the side-lines, and thereby inspired a misinterpretation of the question of the meaning of life.

When I defended this position, it was not in order to assert what I consider plausible as superior to what everyone else considers plausible. It was in the hope that others would find what I had to say plausible, or at least some aspects of it. That is how philosophical debate works. If I had agreed with the consensus, there would have been nothing new for me to say; and if I did not, then I should have said so – as indeed I did. The hope was that people who came across these ideas, might think things like: ‘Yes, maybe nihilism isn’t so bad after all’; ‘Yes, maybe the meaning of life is an interesting philosophical question, and not just something for religious people’; ‘Yes, maybe questions about the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life are distinct, and maybe there is a legitimate secular answer to the former’; ‘Yes, maybe the question of the nature of philosophy has received some suspiciously murky answers, and maybe this has something to do with the

influence of physicalism'; 'Yes, you can have a clean conscience about science while rejecting physicalism; perhaps we're not in the same business after all.' There were bound to be some 'no' answers too, of course, and when you encounter them, you look into the reasoning. That is how philosophical debate works; there is nothing remotely unusual about my book in this respect.

To show that people do not typically have my question in mind when they talk about the meaning of life, Veal turns to an example I gave in a paper (Tartaglia 2015), where I distinguished the meaning *in* a film, from the meaning *of* a film within a wider context than that set up by the film itself. Veal dismisses the need for ordinary language analysis or experimental philosophy to assess my example, and instead relies upon an internet search (p. 218); note how his criticisms of my methodology go by the wayside as soon as he wants to make a claim. What he finds is that when people ask about the meaning of a film, they are looking for an explanation or interpretation of the film. Perhaps so, but then they are evidently not distinguishing between the meaning *in* and *of* the film. My point was that such a distinction can be made. It makes perfect sense to ask about the meaning of a film in a wider social context, rather than about the meaning within the film, and if you did want to make that distinction, it is clear which idiom would be more appropriate; if you wanted to talk about the meaning *in* a film *in* a wider social context, this would suggest that you did not want to talk about the film as a whole, but rather something specific within it. I was trying to show that a similar distinction can be made between meaning in life and the meaning of life; and that if you make the in / of distinction, then it is quite clear which would be more appropriate to the social meaning question, and which to the traditional question. Thaddeus Metz now seems to accept this (Metz 2015). Veal takes the example more seriously than I ever would, however, because on the basis of his discovery about films, he decides that what people are really looking for when they ask about the meaning of life is a 'a *global narrative, worldview or explanatory framework* within which to make overall sense of their lives' (p. 218); an idea he returns to at the end of his paper, by which point his worries about biological species, and respect for diversity of opinion about the nature of the question, are apparently all behind him.

Next Veal begins to criticise me at length for – according to him – saying that 'meaning', 'value', 'significance' and 'purpose' are synonymous. He begins by quoting me:

there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses like “value,” “significance” and “purpose” are easily related. (p. 219 / PML, p. 2)

The reader will note that I said: ‘are easily related’. The view I proceeded to explain, without any explicit or implicit claims about synonymy, is that given the existential import of the question, we are looking for a reason why we exist; and given the evaluative component, the question presupposes that this reason will make our lives valuable or significant in some way – the term ‘significant’ is more conducive to a non-moral interpretation than ‘valuable’, although they can be used synonymously in this context. I also said that a great part of our interest in the question is provided by the prospect that the reason we exist gives life a purpose. Later, Veal says that what my interpretation of the question really ‘boils down to is simply this: “Why did God create us?”’ (p. 223). But knowing why God created us would simply push the question back a stage to the question of why God exists, and of what value there was to his fulfilling his intentions by creating us; I discussed this in the book.

With the apparently wilful misreadings now stacking up fast, Veal goes on to ask why ‘rejecting the presupposition of a theological question should transform it into a “philosophical” question’ (p. 225). What Veal has in mind is my claim that if you neglect the existential component of the question, then it is transformed into either a theological question about which particular meaning God invested in life, or a question about social meaning. I did not say that the question is theological, however, but rather that if you presuppose that its evaluative component must receive a certain kind of religious answer, and focus only on specifying the exact nature of the answer, then your concern with it is purely theological. It is always going to be a philosophical question – a paradigmatically philosophical one, in fact – but those with religious or physicalist convictions tend to neglect its existential component, and hence consider only its evaluative component, because they think they already know the answer to the existential component: typically, that God created reality, for the religious; or that science explains why there is a reality – or that the question does not make sense – for the physicalists. I think both sides are wrong about this, but nevertheless, within their religious or physicalist frameworks, they are asking a philosophical question; they just think that only one part of it needs to be addressed.

The reason I reject any theological presupposition to the question is, rather

obviously, that I think nihilism is true. Veal thinks this creates huge tensions, to put it mildly, with my placing the question at the centre of my account of philosophy. This line of criticism steadily builds in intensity until Veal finally says that,

It would seem to follow, then, that the entire history of philosophy and religion—and science, too, inasmuch as it lacked self-consciousness about its proper role and was thus guided by a ‘confused quest’ —has been based upon little more than a rationally unmotivated, idle, *cheap* conceptual possibility. (p. 243)

The main points that arise along the way, and which are supposed to establish this conclusion, are: firstly, that it is ridiculous to argue that the question unifies philosophy when I reject its ‘*core presupposition*’ (p. 226); secondly, that my rejection of the claim that life is absurd is incompatible with claiming that the question of the meaning of life is legitimate (p. 228); thirdly, that the notion of intrinsic value required to provide a positive answer to the question is incoherent (pp. 230-2); fourthly, that I do not provide a good reason to reject positive answers to the question (p. 234); and fifthly, that my conception of a wider context of meaning is incoherent (pp. 232-7).

The answer to the first critical point is that I think the question of the meaning of life directs us to the concept of transcendence, which we need to make metaphysical sense of the world. That I did not ask the question in a theological context has nothing to do with this, because as I tried to show, there are reasons to believe that reality is transcendent, whether or not you think the transcendent context is meaningful. I reject a certain kind of answer to the question, of the kind which has traditionally been presupposed, but not the question itself.

The second objection is good; the section on absurdity in my book does not answer it explicitly – although I did address a similar argument by Metz (PML, p. 191). In the section in question, I argue that life is not absurd; it only seems that way if we compare life to the religious meaning which we find it not to have. But if we are not to evaluate life according to this absent transcendent meaning, why claim that life is meaningless? Why use a measure of meaning that we reject in order to claim that life is meaningless? The answer is that if we do not think there is transcendent meaning, then we have no reason to evaluate life as absurd in light of its absence; but we may still think that reality is transcendent, as I argue that it

is. If reality is transcendent, and hence a transcendent reality provides the final context in which life exists, the question arises of whether that context provides our lives with meaning; a question that is firmly embedded in our history, but is a natural enough one to ask in any case. I think that the transcendence of reality does not provide us with a good reason to think it is meaningful; and this explains why I do not think we should use a transcendent measure of meaning to provide the basis for a judgement that life is absurd.

The third point is only partly a question for me, because, like Veal, I think there is only relational value. Many think there is intrinsic value, however, such as Metz (2013: 92-3). Veal goes too far when he claims that intrinsic value is impossible: 'I find that I'm unable to conceive of any such thing *in any possible world*', he says (p. 231). This must have made learning about the history of philosophy difficult; Plato's theory of forms, for instance, which Veal apparently thinks was an exclusively ethical theory with a relativistic commitment. If we trust Veal's conceivability intuitions, however, then the notion of intrinsic value must be contradictory, in which case either the question of the meaning of life necessarily has a negative answer; or else Veal might revert to his original position, with a little more substance this time, by claiming that the question is incoherent given that it embodies a contradictory notion of meaning. But there is nothing contradictory here. If Veal cannot imagine intrinsic meaning, this is only because he presupposes a physical conception of reality, and thinks that a physical characterisation of a thing would contradict a characterisation of that same thing as intrinsically valuable. I am inclined to agree about the latter, but many, such as Metz, would not. But in any case, if reality is transcendent, as I think it is, then there is no question of our conception of something which is valuable according to its own nature, conflicting with our conception of fundamental reality, because we have no positive conception of fundamental reality for it to conflict with.

The fourth point is accurate enough. I do not provide any new arguments for thinking that life is meaningless; I do not have any. As any reader of the book should quickly ascertain, that is not my focus. My focus is on reconfiguring nihilism and showing that it answers a legitimate question; my focus is on understanding 'philosophy in a meaningless life'. My own convictions about nihilism have been formed on the basis of objective thought, reflection on the nature of the framework, and suspicion of the various arguments for the existence of God. Nevertheless, my various positions on framework engagement, the fact of existence, the nature of philosophy, consciousness, and so on, do provide plenty

of reinforcement to those already inclined to believe that there is no meaning of life; while trying to assuage the natural worry that holding that reality is transcendent must conflict with this belief.

The beginning of the fifth objection is worth quoting:

But if meaning and value necessarily depend upon there being such a wider context—which is something Tartaglia insists upon throughout the book—it is hard to see how he can coherently claim that human life is worthless on the grounds that it is not *intrinsically* valuable, .... (p. 232)

(I shall, for now, withhold comment on the substitution of ‘worthless’ for ‘meaningless’.) As Veal says, I think things only have a meaning within a wider context; in the case of our activities, this is the context provided by our social framework. But then, what is supposed to be anything less than fully coherent about claiming that if human life itself does not fit into a wider context of meaning, then it is meaningless? If the existence of life in the final context is intrinsically meaningful, then there is a meaning of life. But then life would be *part* of the final context, and hence would indeed exist within a wider context of existence. Not in the sense in which an action exists within the framework – a sense reflecting the fact that the framework is obviously not the final context – but rather in a sense more akin to that in which a tree fits into the physical universe. Essentially, the sense that human life exists in the final context, as everything that exists must.

What is meant by ‘within a wider context of existence’ must be different depending on whether or not we are talking about the final context. My reasoning here is echoed by Veal:

For even if God had a reason for creating the physical universe, if the only thing that can make a life meaningful is a wider context of meaning, then God’s life too would need to belong to such a wider context, and so on to infinity. If, on the other hand, God does not need any such wider context, then neither do we, .... (p. 237)

All that could stop the regress is intrinsic meaning. So if God’s life were intrinsically meaningful in the final context, it would belong to a wider context only in the sense of being part of what that context amounts to; not in the sense that would defer us to something else that exists in order to account for its meaning

– because brute, meaningful existence would have been reached. Of course, I do not think there is any such existence, which is why I do not think there is a meaning of life. But it is a perfectly coherent idea of what could make life meaningful, and the only one I have either come across or can think of; it is what God, human beings, or anything else, would require in order to have a meaningful life.

None of these five points remotely support Veal's conclusion, with which I began this part of the discussion, about my supposed position on the entire history of philosophy, religion and science. And that just about brings us to the culmination of Veal's narrative, where he reveals the plot of my book. But before I turn to what he says afterwards, I shall comment on his passing accusation that I misinterpreted Milton Munitz (p. 239); because Veal thinks this leaves me all alone, thereby highlighting how thoroughly idiosyncratic my position is. When I discovered Munitz's work, I focused on the better-known *Boundless Existence*, but I did make one reference to his later *Does Life Have A Meaning?*, saying that in this book, 'Munitz sometimes expresses his message about social meaning in an unnecessarily ambiguous manner' (PML, p. 187). Further down the page from the quotation Veal provides, thinking he has found Munitz rejecting the traditional question, Munitz turns to 'Boundless Existence', or as I would say, transcendent reality, and says that 'since Boundless Existence is Nothing, Emptiness, then *in this respect* life has no meaning either' (Munitz 1993, p. 109). As I was saying, Munitz could have made his 'yes and no' answer a lot clearer (ibid., p. 113).

After the culmination of Veal's paper, there are three extraordinary pages (pp. 253-5), in which he says that my book could foreseeably provoke both suicide and terrorism, and hence is deeply irresponsible. The reasoning, as regards the former, is that one of the most frequently cited reasons for suicide is the feeling that your life is 'meaningless and worthless' (p. 253). The reasoning, as regards the latter, is that terrorists who accept a particular, fundamentalist reading of their sacred texts, of the kind which Veal strongly suggests that he endorses as correct (pp. 254-5), think that mortal life is meaningless / worthless, but that transcendent reality is paradise. Since Veal thinks, or at least says, that I take essentially the same view – which requires him to disregard pretty much everything about the book, including the first sentence of the preface, even – then since Veal also thinks this fundamentalist reading encourages the killing of unbelievers, he accuses my position of helping to justify terrorist suicide attacks. Given the fundamentalist reading, which Veal strongly suggests that he endorses, he is prepared to ask: 'who



can blame them?’ (p. 255).

It is now high time to comment on the meaningless / worthless issue. The word ‘worthless’ appears thirty-six times in Veal’s paper. It appears nine times in my book: twice in a discussion on page 6, once in a quotation from Robert Nozick on page 18, and six times in a discussion on page 171. In both of the discussions, the point I argue for – and it is abundantly clear that the only reason I use the word ‘worthless’ is to make this point – is that the metaphysical sense in which I am saying that life is meaningless, is *not* the social sense in which we might condemn life as worthless. This is what I say the first time:

If life has a meaning, then, this could be bad. But nihilism cannot be. To say that life is meaningless is to say that it is valueless or worthless; but only in the sense that value is not essential to what it is. It is not to say that we are worthless in the socially contextual sense that would amount to a condemnation. (PML, p. 6)

And this is what I say the second time:

The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of ‘meaningless’ with ‘socially worthless’. It is perfectly reasonable that people should want to avoid condemning life as worthless in this sense, of course; worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them. Arguably mosquitoes are worthless. If human life were worthless, then extreme, unrestricted misanthropy and so-called antinatalism – the view that being born is bad and that the extinction of the human race would be good – would not be absurd. And if we did take this kind of view seriously, the solution to our predicament would be obvious, just as Epicurus saw: it would be to solve Camus’s ‘one truly serious philosophical problem’ with suicide. Thankfully (if rather conveniently) the advocates of these views usually manage to persuade themselves that this is not the solution. However, the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not. (p. 171)

The reader can now see all of my eight uses of the word ‘worthless’. There is no trace of an argument in Veal’s paper to the effect that the above reasoning fails,

and hence that, in discussing my position, ‘worthless’ is a valid substitution for ‘meaningless’. So in light of this, it does not strike me as reasonable academic practice to continually make this substitution, or else place ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ alongside each other as if I considered them synonymous.

Now in the first quotation above, I said, ‘To say that life is meaningless is to say that it is valueless or worthless’; and immediately qualified this by saying that I do not mean in ‘the socially contextual sense that would amount to a condemnation’. In the metaphysical sense, life is indeed worthless; and loveless; and hateless, etc., because the final context of reality is not a context of meaning. No evaluative concepts can apply to our existence if there is no meaning of life; and when we do sometimes, outside of metaphysics, apply them to life as a whole, I think we almost inevitably say something either vacuous or false (PML, p. 53, 56). The reason I alighted upon worthlessness in particular to make my point, is because I think the false view that nihilism is negatively evaluative results from confusing it with a social condemnation. As I say in the second passage, ‘The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of “meaningless” with “socially worthless”’. One of the main aims of my book was to diagnose the error of making this equation. Veal may still make it, but if there is anyone who it should not be attributed to, then that person is surely me. And yet this is what Veal does: again and again and again.

There is a mention of suicide in the second passage. Here, as the passage makes quite clear, I had in mind misanthropic views, such as those of Schopenhauer, Cioran, and David Benatar, according to which human life is provided with a negative evaluation, and it is claimed that it would be better if we did not exist. My point was that if life could correctly be evaluated as worthless, which is an idea I consider completely absurd, then suicide would indeed seem like a sensible solution. I mentioned this kind of position because it shows the most extreme conclusion you could reach from mistakenly thinking of nihilism as a negative evaluation; a mistake I set out to diagnose, thereby undermining such positions, to the extent that they use nihilism as a motivation. Ray Brassier commented on Veal’s paper for him. Brassier wrote a book defending nihilism and opened his book with a quotation from Thomas Ligotti, who uses nihilism to utterly condemn human life. The other commentator was Metz. Metz thinks of nihilism as a negative evaluation; if a person lives a meaningless life, then this is certainly very bad, on his view, even if it does not follow that their life is socially worthless. So if there were anything to Veal’s extreme criticisms of my position,

I think Brassier and Metz would have a lot more to worry about than me.

So let me start with the ‘lending encouragement to suicide’ idea. I wrote a book in which I argued that nihilism is not an evaluation, and in which I attacked the view that the question of the meaning of life concerns social meaning of a meritorious kind that can be measured and compared, such that one person might be praised for living a meaningful life, and another condemned for living a comparatively meaningless one. If somebody was worried by the thought that their life was meaningless, and could not be persuaded out of it, then I should have thought that this is exactly the kind of thing they would want to hear. For I am saying that there is no intellectual substance to the idea that their particular life has failed to reach the level of meaningfulness of other people’s, and hence is worthy of condemnation; and that in the only substantive sense in which life is meaningless, the same is true of *everybody*. Moreover, it is not bad that life is meaningless in this more weighty sense: to think that it is, is to make an intellectual error.

Now for the ‘lending encouragement to terrorism’ idea. I wrote a book arguing that transcendent reality is meaningless and cannot be a context of consciousness; that all value and meaning resides within the mortal lives we find within the context of consciousness. If the terrorist is persuaded by that, then they have a decisive reason to call off their suicide attack, because they will no longer believe that it will take them to paradise; they will no longer believe there is a paradise, and will instead believe that they will never find any value except in mortal life, which is the only kind there is.

Once more, let me try to find the underlying concern; for there must surely be one, even in these extreme cases. As Veal is aware, I think philosophy has become far too insular, and can counteract this by reconnecting with issues that matter to people, such as the meaning of life. His worry is that this is dangerous territory. People end their lives because they feel them to be meaningless, and the notion of transcendence persuades others to condemn this life as meaningless and to attack those who place value in it. On the most charitable interpretation I can muster, Veal realises that I am not promoting such notions, but worries that my views would be open to misinterpretation within the public domain; and that any attempt to revive interest in issues such as nihilism and transcendence is consequently irresponsible. In his view, such issues are best left alone; not only are they patent nonsense, as any respectable naturalist realises, but they are also dangerous in the wrong hands.

It seems to me, however, that these issues are already firmly in the public domain, and that it is the duty of academic philosophy to try to give rational direction to their discussion. If there are good reasons to think that nihilism is not an evaluative condemnation, as I think there are, then it must be a good thing to argue this, given the harm that the negative evaluation idea can have. Simply avoiding the topic is not going to help, not only because the view that nihilism is a negative evaluation is firmly embedded in many minds, as Veal's examples show, but also because some philosophers continue to reinforce this view. Providing support to the religious view that reality is transcendent has its dangers, of course, but so does the naturalist dismissal of such views. For if the meaning of life is interpreted as a question of social meaning, not only does nihilism remain a negative evaluation, but the issue arises of how to draw a principled distinction between making your life socially meaningful in a moral, or at least non-immoral way, and making it socially meaningful in any way whatsoever; desire to achieve fame at any cost strikes me as evidently on the rise in our world, and a very worrying social trend. If defenders of a social conception of the meaning of life, as they think of it, continue to insist that the notion they have in mind precludes immoral action, and if defenders of the traditional conception continue to insist either that there is no transcendent context, or that there is one but that it cannot, or does not, usurp the value we find in life, then we are all on the right side. If we can find arguments to support these stances, we will potentially be doing some good. Saying nothing is not the answer from a social, pragmatic stance, because there are others on the wrong side; arguing against such views will not *help* their efforts. And from a more purely philosophical point of view, if the issues are legitimate, then philosophers *should* discuss them, so long as they do so responsibly.

Veal finishes the paper with a naturalistic sketch of a theory of the meaning of life, as he thinks of it. He thinks that by, 'placing our lives in the context of human history, human history in the context of the evolution of life on earth, and life on earth in the context of cosmological evolution, [we] can provide considerable meaning to our lives, both individually and collectively' (p. 255). He says that we are special, both for our physical unusualness, and the fact that this has allowed us to acquire extensive knowledge about the universe; and that this is 'quite capable of providing "overall meaning" to our lives' (p. 256). He goes on to say that our lives are made more meaningful when we reject the idea of an afterlife, and realise that our mortal lives are the only ones we will ever have (p.

256).

This is the only part of the paper, except for the incongruous introduction, where my work is not being targeted; so my judgement that Veal seems to work best in this positive vein should perhaps be taken with a pinch of salt. However, if he does want to pursue this project, I think he would be well-advised to drop the phrase ‘the meaning of life’; given his deep suspicions about it, and the fact that the picture he has in mind would not address that issue. For it would not answer the existential component; this cannot be done within an exclusively naturalistic framework. Although some people might find that reflecting on their place with the natural world allows them to attribute a certain kind of value to human life as a whole, such value does not explain why human life exists. We are not here because we are physically unusual, if indeed we are. We are not here because we value the physical processes that produced us, if indeed we do; they certainly do not value us. Others who do not make the physicalist’s confusion of naturalistic knowledge with metaphysics might say, rather more naturally, that our capacity for love, for instance, attributes a certain kind of value to human life as a whole; but, *ceteris paribus*, this would be equally tangential to the question.

Veal has simply looked for a question he can ask within an exclusively naturalistic framework; one which shadows in form the question of the meaning of life. But since it will not address the philosophical concerns behind that question, this simply muddies the waters. Perhaps this is what he wants to do; but if his concerns really are constructive, and if he is consistent, then I do not think it makes sense for him to allow a discredited theological agenda, as he sees it, to dictate his project. Nevertheless, I am perfectly open to the idea that naturalists may be able to say something plausible about our ‘specialness’, if that is something people desire. And maybe it could be argued that our lives acquire more social meaning when we no longer believe in a transcendent context of meaning; although I am sure religious believers would disagree, so this is one for them and the naturalists to discuss. Personally, I am very suspicious of such judgements, as I made plain in my book.

Finally, a word on Veal’s title: “‘Life is Meaningless.’ Compared to What?’ I cannot see that it has much to do with the paper, but nevertheless, here is the answer I gave (at this point in the book, I was discussing the more specific hypothesis that life has a purpose):

Life has no overall purpose compared to what? Compared to games, to how

things seem in the framework, and to how things might be if there is a wider context of meaning. We cannot give our lives this kind of purpose, but we do not need to anyway, because we have more localized and transitory purposes to occupy ourselves with. (PML, p. 56)

This answer refers back to my reflections upon our typical absorption in the framework; reflections which bring nihilism into view. Veal pays no attention to any of this and so nihilism never comes into view for him. This is fine, since no one needs to engage in this kind of reflection if it does not interest them; that said, Veal was writing a critique of my book and he chose a title which suggested he would. Nevertheless, in light of his positive views, you would expect him to be sympathetic to at least the final sentence.

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## Transcendence and Mediation From Tartaglia to the Free-Will Debate

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### Abstract

Taking inspiration from James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, I suggest a way out of the present dialectical stalemate in analytic philosophy of free will and moral responsibility. The key concept employed in my proposal is *transcendence*, i.e., our remarkable ability to self-relativize by stepping back from the social framework understanding which determines our systems of value. Analytic philosophers who favor one of the standard, determinate and mutually exclusive positions in the free-will debate have marginalized this aspect of transcendence in human life. For if one conceives human life as essentially involving the movement of transcendence, then one can discern an element of self-deception in the analytic philosophers' self-images of themselves as defenders of the one true theory, as cast within a fixed framework of language and thought. One of the central suggestions of this essay is that analytic philosophers – including myself – should abandon such a self-image, because when we philosophize, we are always already engaged in an endless effort of self-reflection, self-criticism and self-revision. I argue, in addition, that it is loyalty to the untenable self-image which forces the philosophical debate on free will and moral responsibility into a vicious deadlock. As such, my essay is an attempt to philosophically investigate the topic of free will without succumbing to the self-image of 'Seeker of The Unique and Definitive Truth'.

### Preface

A lesson which we can learn from James Tartaglia's recently published book (Tartaglia 2016) is that to search for a straightforward answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" is not among the tasks of philosophy. The reason why I stress this is because, in the present Anglophone philosophical literature, several prominent authors (e.g., Wolf 2010, Metz 2014) engage themselves in answering that question by proposing a determinate view about which factor or condition makes a person's life meaningful. Tartaglia's discourse developed in that book would, I suggest, fundamentally explicate why those philosophers' approach to the issue of life's meaning is on a wrong track. The problem is not that they do not give a right answer to the question, but that they care about a wrongfully oriented question. What is important here is therefore to reconsider

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what we should ask, or more basically what we should aim at, when we philosophically talk about the meaning of life.

Why, however, is this so? *I.e.*, for what reason should we say that a direct approach to the simple question about life's meaning is not an appropriate way to consider the issue in question? It might be roughly explained as follows.

One of Tartaglia's important suggestions is, as I understand it, that philosophy is an activity practiced through, and throughout, each of our lives. Or, in other words, each of us is involved in philosophy as her or his life goes on. Therefore, "philosophy, like life, needs no end" (Tartaglia 2016: 181). What we should grasp here is that there *is* a sense of the word in which we can say one keeps engaging oneself in 'philosophy' insofar as one's life continues. We, in fact, continuously re-examine what we believe to be true and revise it, insofar as we live. If we call such an endlessly self-revising aspect of our life by the name 'philosophy', it cannot be the case that some philosophical problem or another will be solved once and for all.

Any determinate dogma such as, *e.g.*, "The meaning of a person's life consists in making the world better" thus does not belong to philosophy in this sense, because any supposed answer to what life's meaning is should be reconsidered sooner or later, insofar as we live. Any activity of philosophy (in that sense) does not contain any moments properly described as 'solutions', 'proofs', 'rejections' and so on. What philosophy really involves is rather, *e.g.*, a never-ending effort to deepen our own understanding of our world and ourselves. The attempt to find a conclusive statement that the meaning of life is such-and-such, therefore, would not be any part of philosophy in that significant sense.

Tartaglia explains such a conception of philosophy, *i.e.*, philosophy as self-renewal as it were, in terms of 'transcendence'. Human beings, he suggests, can transcend their world and themselves, and thereby continuously turn their understanding of reality into a new one. This transcending aspect of human life is a fundamental basis for one's being able to engage oneself in philosophy as self-renewal. Many contemporary philosophers of the analytic tradition, unconsciously or not, tend to disregard such *dialektische Bewegung* of transcendence in human life, because they favor a statement that could be uniquely interpreted through a determinate model. This is possibly an unfortunate effect of logico-positivist partiality in the tradition of analytic philosophy. We, however, transcend our world and ourselves. Any philosophical

inquiry, if it intends to conceive human life as a whole, should not ignore our transcending essence.

What I am going to do in this paper is to take over Tartaglia's discourse about transcendence and enlarge it in a certain direction. One of my central suggestions is that the dialectical deadlock in the on-going controversy about free will and moral responsibility in analytic philosophy is caused by the participants' neglecting that remarkable feature of transcendence in human life. "Are we free or not?" is also a question for which a straightforward answer should not naïvely be sought, as I will explain. We should rather transcend such a dichotomous framework of inquiry around 'free' or 'unfree' to jump into an arena where we could cooperate with each other to deepen our understanding of freedom. My concluding remark will be that we should accept a sort of contradictory view, or, more accurately, we should take a perspective, or *Horizont*, from which we can suppose that human beings are free in a significant sense; and at the same time significantly unfree as well.

Someone might wonder why this conclusion is important. As a minimal reply to such doubt, I note here that, not only to solve a problem within a given framework, but also to deepen our understanding of the whole issue in question, can qualify as a fruit of philosophical work (I would suggest that Tartaglia's contribution to philosophy consists not in solving a certain traditional problem but in creating a novel discourse in terms of which we can say a number of new things about our nature of engaging ourselves in philosophy). What I aim at in this paper is also not the solution of a certain problem but a deepening of our understanding of human existence. The analytic philosophers of free will and moral responsibility, at least in the last decades, tend to simply ask whether or not we are free and, as a result, remain in a stalemate where the pro-freedom and anti-freedom camps have nothing to say to each other. So, I will try to develop a 'narrative' which would help us to take a detour away from, or find a way out of, that fruitless dead-end.

The argument of this paper runs as follows. To begin with, I introduce the *status quo* of the free-will debate and explain how it falls into a stalemate (Section 1). Next, I present some of Tartaglia's central suggestions in his book (Section 2), because they enable us to understand what is fundamentally responsible for the vicious stalemate in question. I will argue that it is "marginalization" of the concern about transcendence in the recent trend of analytic philosophy that makes the free-will debate unproductive (Sections 3 and

4).

1.

The participants in the on-going controversy about free will are roughly divided into three camps, *i.e.*, libertarians, compatibilists, and free will skeptics, as you would already know. These positions are defined in relation to the metaphysical thesis of determinism, as you again already know. If a person believes that the truth of determinism is compatible with the existence of human freedom, then she is a compatibilist, and if not, then an incompatibilist. Among the incompatibilists, there are two subgroups, *i.e.*, libertarians who deny determinism but affirm the existence of free will, and free will skeptics who accept determinism and the non-existence of freedom. The compatibilists are naturally protagonists of freedom of will, because their arguing for the compatibility of determinism and human freedom pragmatically implies their commitment to the existence of free will.

In most cases, a participant in the present free will debate would be categorized as an advocate of one of those three views: libertarianism, compatibilism, or free will skepticism. To randomly enumerate prominent figures: Robert Kane, Timothy O'Connor and Carl Ginet are libertarians; Harry Frankfurt, John Martin Fischer and Susan Wolf are compatibilists; and Galen Strawson, Derk Pereboom and Bruce Waller are free will skeptics. What each of them wishes to do in the debate is, most simply speaking, to find an argument which concludes that his or her position is right, or that a position which she or he does not accept is wrong. As the debate proceeds, more and more articulated arguments are proposed. We will learn a number of 'fine' conceptual distinctions as we follow their works.

What I am going to argue in this section is that this framework of inquiry leads the debaters, sooner or later, to a stalemate of the vicious kind. Such a phenomenon is, I suggest, symptomatic of Richard Double's experience.

Several years ago at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association a very prominent incompatibilist commented on a paper delivered by a younger, less prominent, but very sharp compatibilist. The exchange between the two lasted the entire hour, and toward the end it became clear that neither speaker could understand at all why the other held the position

that he did: one spoke, the other just shook his head in disbelief. (Double 1991: 5)

I think that it is not simply contingent that these two philosophers from different camps finally ‘swear’ at each other. Such a quarrel sometimes happens in the free will debate because of the framework of inquiry, as explained in the following.

Libertarianism, compatibilism, and free will skepticism are, in reality, defined as mutually exclusive. If, therefore, you presuppose that what philosophy of free will seeks would be an answer to the question of which of those positions is true, then your choosing of one of them inevitably entails your abandoning the other two. When, *e.g.*, a compatibilist argues, in some way, that human freedom is realizable even under the truth of determinism, any incompatibilist should suggest that there must be something wrong with the argument in question, because the core of her position implies the negation of any compatibilist reconciliation between determinism and free will.

The opposition between those camps is deeper than this, however. *E.g.*, an incompatibilist could not be persuaded to convert to compatibilism insofar as she *is* an incompatibilist. For the effort of persuasion would make sense only if two opposing sides talk to each other about an issue of which at least one side can partly make a concession to the other. If, therefore, two positions with directly conflicting core ideas compete with each other by asking which of these ideas is right, then they reach, sooner or later, a place where both sides have nothing more to say than, *e.g.*, “Our idea is intuitively correct” or “I can’t understand how you could accommodate such a view.” The free will debate thus very often ends in a kind of impasse where all the debaters can do is just repeat: “I cannot believe you are right.” (The same thing holds in many fields of analytic philosophy, *e.g.*, the philosophy of mind debate among type-A physicalism, type-B physicalism and dualism. So, if my argument in this paper is right, it would be applicable to further areas.)

I shall introduce an example which very typically represents the lack of mutual understanding in the free will debate.

Derk Pereboom, a prominent free will skeptic as I mentioned above, suggests in his book that “if all of our behavior was ‘in the cards’ before we were born, [...] then we cannot legitimately be blamed for our wrongdoing” (Pereboom 2001: 6). This is an expression of the core idea of incompatibilism,

and I suggest that all of us can sympathize with it to some degree. We have, in fact, many ways to construct discourses in which the idea in question would be understandable: “if our behavior was predetermined, we would contribute nothing to it,” “if all of our behavior was in the cards before we were born, someone who – or something which – had dealt the cards would be the true author of our behavior,” *et cetera*. John Martin Fischer, an eminent compatibilist as I mentioned above, however, opposes this idea in a very unsympathetic mood:

Our behavior’s “being in the cards” is obviously metaphor. Pereboom means by this that conditions prior to our births “inevitably result in our behavior by a deterministic causal process.” If the problematic notion of inevitability simply implies the notion of entailment, then Pereboom’s claim just comes down to the unargued-for assumption that causal determination in the actual sequence rules out responsibility. Again, this is dialectically unhelpful. If “inevitability” also implies some sort of actual sequence compulsion, this is question-begging within the dialectic context. Why exactly is it the case that one’s behavior’s being “in the cards,” in the relevant sense, involves problematic compulsion and thus directly rules out moral responsibility? (Fischer 2002: 201)

We should remark that what Fischer says in this quotation is, in short, that he cannot interpret Pereboom as saying something right about the matter at hand. Fischer just shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head. Certainly, it is natural, or even obligatory, for Fischer as a compatibilist to oppose the incompatibilist idea. But, I suggest that there is something wrong with the compatibilist’s directly refuting stance in considering incompatibilist ideas (the same thing can be said about any incompatibilist’s simple refusal of compatibilist intuitions).

My suggestion here is not that the philosophers have to avoid any kind of conflict about their core views on a relevant issue. I rather admit that, insofar as philosophy is a serious project in our life, *i.e.*, it faces ‘hard’ problems about our world and ourselves which are essentially different from any matter of mere taste, it is inevitable for our philosophical views to collide against each other. I suppose, in addition, that a philosophical opposition of the ‘legitimate’ type, if any exist, possibly reaches the extreme where two rivals will never be reconciled with each other, even if that opposition is very fruitful in the sense

that it will produce many novel narratives in the relevant field. Thus, not every opposition ought to be prevented, but what type of opposition holds does matter, and it is the unproductive type of conflict that should be avoided, as I shall argue in this section.

What I will criticize is, in a word, a presupposition of the free will debate as a whole, consciously or unconsciously held by the participants concerning the orientation of inquiry. I would like, in other words, to criticize the debaters' understanding of what philosophy of free will aims at. Except for several remarkable non-standard authors<sup>1</sup>, all the participants of the free will debate presuppose that a certain view on free will is 'objectively' correct and that what they ought to seek is the 'true' theory of human freedom. They suppose, in consequence, that at most one of libertarianism, compatibilism, and free will skepticism, is true – and hence two of them must be false. The assumption that there is one objectively true conception of free will thus orients the debaters toward a simple battle in which the only thing each camp should do is to defend itself and attack the others.

What, however, if we human beings are free in that we can 'transcend' a fixed orientation of inquiry? Or, what if we are free in that we can 'destruct' a given framework of intellectual activities and 'construct' a new way of discourse which would enable us to engage ourselves in investigation in a radically different way? And, what if our deeper freedom consists in such a transcending creation? Then, we cannot but doubt the legitimacy of the 'naïve' research project in seeking one true theory of free will. I will come back to this point later.

What I am arguing is that the 'triadic' competition of libertarianism, compatibilism, and free will skepticism ends by falling into a vicious deadlock. I present another example. In the final paragraph of his paper, focused on clarification of his conception of agent causation, Randolph Clarke tentatively identifies the reason why many of us would reject compatibilism (and non-agent-causal libertarianism) by saying that,

we find unsatisfactory any view of free will that allows that everything

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<sup>1</sup> Honderich 1993/2002, Double 1991, 1996, Smilansky 2000, and Sommers 2012 suppose that what philosophy of free will should aim at is not to find a straightforward answer to the question of whether or not we are free but to consider, *e.g.*, the following question about life: With what idea of freedom should we live? I would like to consider a genealogy of such non-standard thinkers elsewhere.

that causally brings about an agent's action is itself causally brought about by something in the distant past. Certainly any freedom of will that we enjoy on such a view, if not a complete fraud, is a pale imitation of freedom that is characterized by an agent-causal account. (Clarke 1993: 298)

The compatibilists immediately contend that they, and a number of us, would not find that view unsatisfactory! I stress again that all of us could sympathize with their claim to some degree, as well as Clarke's. We have, in fact, many ways to construct discourses in which the compatibilist idea would be understandable: "some significant concept of freedom must be compatible with the truth of determinism, because, on one hand, we cannot but distinguish 'free' persons from 'unfree' insofar as we ordinarily differentiate normal adults from children, mere animals, or adults with 'abnormal' conditions, and, on the other hand, the distinction of 'free' and 'unfree' in this sense must be realizable even in a strict causal connection of events since it is undeniable that we human beings are a part of the causally connected totality of nature, in which human behavior should be regarded as an effect of the combination of past events." But, if the debaters presuppose that at most one side among the compatibilists and Clarke have it right, then all that each side can finally do is just spit out, "I have no idea why you think so."

I repeatedly suggest that such lack of mutual understanding is problematic. I realize, however, that my suggestion would be somehow difficult to accept, or even hard to understand, for people who have an analytic interest in scrutinizing the technically detailed arguments developed in the recent literature. I should add further that the traditional 'triadic' framework of the free will debate is not completely fruitless, because it has produced many illuminating conceptual distinctions, such as the difference between 'leeway' and 'source' type of freedom.<sup>2</sup> To touch upon my personal history, I learned very many things by reading texts written by prominent authors including Pereboom, Fischer and Clarke. In what sense, then, can I criticize the recent research interest of philosophy of free will?

My criticism would be, I dare to say, a kind of hope, *i.e.*, hope that

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<sup>2</sup> The 'leeway' type of freedom is defined by so-called alternative possibilities, while the 'source' type is characterized by origination, not necessarily by alternatives. This distinction added an important twist to the recent debate.

philosophy of free will would be further developed if the traditional framework can be overcome, or *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense. More concretely, I expect that, if we stop asking which of libertarianism, compatibilism, and free will skepticism is objectively true, then we will thereby keep away from the recent unproductive stalemate and be in a position to better say something which enables us to understand the matter in a novel and deeper way.

While this paper might be interpreted as an anti-analytic-philosophy manifesto, I have no intention to say that the tendency to subtlety and rigidity found in the contemporary Anglophone literature is harmful. Insofar as all the philosophers are essentially critics of sloppy discourses (no philosopher as such intends to be an obscurantist!), it would be reasonable for them to pursue a 'rigid' way of argumentation. It is, however, important for us to realize that there is "something it is easy to forget when we are engaged in philosophy, especially in our cool, contemporary style," as Peter Strawson says (Strawson 1962: 77). We would, *e.g.*, easily forget the transcending nature of our thinking, if we engaged ourselves in an analytic project to construct a logically consistent discourse about a given subject matter. More concretely, *e.g.*, our familiarity with logical considerations developed throughout the history of analytic philosophy would urge us to scorn respect for the transcending movement of human thinking. There is, however, something true about a contradictory statement like "we are fundamentally free, and at the same time fundamentally unfree," and the concept of transcendence would enable us to make sense of this statement in a significant way, which will be explained in Sections 3 and 4. In the next section, I will introduce, or re-construct in my own way, what Tartaglia says about the transcendent aspect of human thinking.

## 2.

Tartaglia, in the book in question, engages himself in philosophy in the dimension of transcendence, as it were. He does not construct his position in a fixed framework, but continuously 'deconstructs' the frameworks in which contemporary philosophy is performed. His argumentation could therefore be classed as non-standard, or even strange, because the mainstream of contemporary philosophy in the English-speaking world, *i.e.*, analytic philosophy, tends to neglect or disrespect such a transcending movement of the human intellectual ability, as I suggested in the preface of this paper. Tartaglia



touches on the reason why analytic philosophy systematically ignores the phenomenon of transcendence, when he says

[...] concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life have been marginalized over the course of the history of philosophy, especially in twentieth-century analytic philosophy's drive to naturalism and the emulation of scientific or mathematical inquiry [...]. (Tartaglia 2016: 73)

What we should note is that, according to Tartaglia, analytic philosophy's assimilation of philosophical inquiry to the scientific, brought about the twentieth-century marginalization of concerns about transcendence. We should remark, in addition, that there is suggested to be some connection between transcendence and life's meaning in the quotation. What is transcendence, then, and what relationship does it have with the meaning of life?

Tartaglia, in that book, introduces the concept of transcendence in the context of a consideration of the issue about the meaning of life, as explained in the following paragraphs.

We ordinarily live with confidence in the meaningfulness of our daily practice, because "the social framework we live within, which has been building up over the course of history, makes it seem that our lives have an overall point" (Tartaglia 2016: 22). In fact, our social framework brings with it many devices such as commercial advertisements, school education, books, and much else, which 'implant' and reinforce the belief in the meaning of our present activities and thereby prevent us from reconsidering whether our life has an ultimate meaning at all. We affirm, *e.g.*, the meaningfulness of study in school by saying that, if a person does not study well in school, she or he will not earn much in the future; and none of us would ever doubt the truth of this in daily life. In this sense, we are ordinarily 'immersed' in our social framework, just as much as non-human animals who are more or less inevitably immersed in their biological frameworks (Tartaglia 2016: 24).

We human beings, however, are not always immersed in the daily framework. We can "step back from our framework," objectify it, and locate it in a larger context (Tartaglia 2016: 24). We can, *e.g.*, see our everyday practice from the perspective of the physical universe and thereby find that our moral behavior, or social activity in general, is just a part of the complex totality of the 'law-abiding' movements of physical matter. This ability to step back from a

given framework Tartaglia calls ‘transcendence’, which he interestingly supposes to be “a by-product of the freedom we evolved in the transition from the structures of a biological to a more malleable social framework” (Tartaglia 2016: 24).

By exercise of this ability of transcendence, we realize that what our social framework supposes to be the absolute values in our life, *e.g.*, pleasure, wealth, commercial success, industrial development, and so on, are ‘worthless’ things in a higher or deeper context. If, *e.g.*, we ascend to the perspective of physical nature, then we find that, objectively, there is no axiological difference between socially presumed good and bad actions, because both are fundamentally just complex sums of value-free movements of micro-physical matter. Every normative feature of the world vanishes from the physical perspective. Transcendence thus brings about nihilism, *i.e.*, the view that there is no absolute value which would ascribe an overall point to our life. There is something true about nihilism, and we know it. For, if we step back from the social framework, which would ordinarily give some seemingly ultimate point to our daily activities, we realize that social matters are just a sort of illusion, and nothing matters at a deeper, more fundamental level. The physical universe, in short, is indifferent to what happens in our world. Our life in it therefore lacks an overall point.

While many philosophers wish to reject nihilism, Tartaglia rather affirms it, partly because that view, he suggests, reflects the truth of our world which our ability of transcendence unveils. He adds that, contrary to naïve expectation, realizing the truth of nihilism has no grave consequences in our practical life. He says that, as a matter of fact,

trying to make money, change the world for the better, become famous, find love or just stay out of prison, all remain just as compelling as they ever were in light of nihilism, except to the extent that they were thought to contribute to an overall purpose to life [...]. (Tartaglia 2016: 43)

Even after we find that there is no ultimate goal in our life, we cannot but live in our daily social framework. Relative goals like wealth or development, therefore, continue to be things we should pursue in our life. What changes, then, when we realize the truth of nihilism? Tartaglia says that all we should do is “re-engage with the [social] framework” (Tartaglia 2016: 43). We should, in

other words, engage ourselves in the same things as before, but now we would do so without the illusion that these social activities have an absolute value. Nihilism, in short, wakes us up, but does not necessarily imply despair or hopelessness.

Many who regard nihilism as a source of ruination, nevertheless, would seek a firm ground on which we hit the ultimate framework, and which no one could transcend. Tartaglia himself, however, transcends this common frame of thinking, which uncritically supposes that nihilism ruins us. So, his philosophy does not begin with the assumption that there may possibly be a firm ground which would give us some overall meaning, but rather with the fact that we continuously transcend, *i.e.*, objectify and relativize, our given frameworks. I will explain this point in the following. How Tartaglia's focus on transcendence determines his conception of philosophy will thereby be clarified.

The intellectual activity he calls 'philosophy' is not a purely ontological description of the world within a given framework. It could, should and even must in some cases, transcend that fixed framework to ask, "In what respect does this kind of ontological description matter?" Even in the midst of an exciting inquiry, indeed, we can always, and should sometimes, step back from an 'absorbed' perspective and ask about the meaning of the inquiry to which we are presently devoted. If philosophy is an attempt to understand our world and ourselves *as a whole*, then it should not overlook this transcending feature of our movement of thought. In this sense, it is reasonable for Tartaglia to qualify 'philosophy' as involving reflective consideration on the meaning of the issues it engages itself with (Tartaglia 2016: 69-70).

To organize these points, I introduce Tartaglia's term of 'enframement'. He says that, generally,

if we want to understand the meaning of a particular practice, we do so by framing it within the wider context of social life [...]. (Tartaglia 2016: 70)

Suppose that, *e.g.*, a student asks, "Why should I study at all?" In order to answer, we have to find a comparatively broad framework which locates, within it, the practice of study as a means to another end. *E.g.*, when we reply, "If you don't study well, you won't earn much in the future," we thereby appeal to the framework which determines money as an absolute value, the meaningfulness of which is stipulated to be undoubted under the context in question. Needless to

say, we can also transcend the latter framework and ask “Why is money relevant?” To answer this, we need a broader framework still.

To understand the meaning of a practice is, therefore, to realize a framework in which the practice in question is determined as meaningful. Tartaglia thus calls a question of this type, *i.e.*, a question about the meaning of a practice and its background framework, “a question of enframement” (Tartaglia 2016: 70). Another type of philosophical question, *i.e.*, an ‘objective’ inquiry into the fundamental elements of the world, is traditionally called ‘ontology.’ The terminology of ‘enframement’ and ‘ontology’ enable us to catch the point of Tartaglia’s conception of philosophy. What he suggests is, in short, that our philosophical investigation should not only consist of ontology but also enframement, even though the interest of the latter kind is marginalized in the trend of analytic philosophy, as I already mentioned.

It is arguable, in fact, that philosophy is originally a sort of two-wheeled vehicle for conceiving our existence. *E.g.*, for Plato, a philosopher’s ontological knowledge of the transcendent world, or especially the knowledge of the Idea of Goodness, would guide our life by telling us what our practice fundamentally aims at, as Tartaglia illustrates (Tartaglia 2016: 72). I would like to add Spinoza’s *Ethics* as another example, where the fundamental meaning of our intellectual activity is found to be an exercise of our human rational essence as determined by God’s eternal nature. Ontology and enframement are thus “tightly interwoven” (Tartaglia 2016: 72). Answering the question of the enframement of an ontological inquiry would justify the whole philosophical project at a deeper level. In this sense, in virtue of the two-wheeled-ness of its concern, philosophy would proceed on the right track. If a philosopher, conversely, lost her interest in ‘transcendent’ explanation and justification of the meaning of her first-order ontological research, then her investigation would fail to do all that it could do. This would be a significant fault, Tartaglia supposes. I will argue that his judgment is relevantly right, through consideration of the free will debate.

Several chapters, *i.e.*, chapter 4-7, of Tartaglia’s book consider the problems of consciousness, time and universals in the light of his ‘two-wheeled’ philosophy, although I would like to omit the details. He explicates, throughout those chapters, that “experience does not belong to the objective world” (Tartaglia 2016: 176). This means that any objective description of reality could not exhaust everything there is. Something would always remain, which transcends our objectification. Tartaglia calls this supposition the “transcendent

hypothesis”, which I take to be another expression of the fact that we continuously transcend our given frameworks.

This ‘hypothesis’ explains why, *e.g.*, the materialist reduction of consciousness in philosophy of mind would be unsatisfactory, because such an attempt would only succeed in making a clear analysis of the conscious phenomenon in the physicalist framework at the price of overlooking, or even denying, the dimension of human experiential transcendence. On reflection, however, we cannot but realize that we could transcend such a ‘material’ framework to conceive an ‘idealistic’ aspect of the phenomenon in question, as Kant did. The materialists’ success, in short, carries with it a significant cost. A dualist conception of consciousness, on the other hand, would absurdly try to objectify the transcendent dimension, without adequate understanding of the hypothesis in question. The most important point here is to realize that there is a genuinely transcendent feature of human thought and experience. We should, therefore, abandon the ambition to describe everything in front of our objective eyes. Both the materialists and dualists are caught by ‘a philosophically bad obsession’, insofar as they aim to objectify all the essential aspects of the conscious phenomenon.

Repeatedly, the materialists deny transcendence, while the dualists objectify it. Generally speaking, it is the dialectic of these two approaches, *i.e.*, negation of transcendence and objectification of it, that makes progress in philosophy (although, in most cases, the debaters do not explicitly realize that we human beings are an essentially transcending existence). This is one of the central suggestions developed in the final chapter of Tartaglia’s book. He says that,

[p]hilosophy proceeds as a perennial debate between these two factions, with one side reminding us of the fact of transcendence only to take it in the wrong direction, and the other side trying to deny it. Thus the first provide alternative articulations of transcendent being to that provided by objective thought – typically achieved by treating our shadow concepts of experience as accurate representation – with this then producing a clash with commitments which the other side consider obligatory, such as physicalism, positivism or common sense. (Tartaglia 2016: 180)

In addition,

the debate goes on and shows no sign of abating, as various approaches to affirming or denying transcendence are developed from generation to generation; taking in new discoveries and reflecting new interests. This constitutes progress in philosophy; a progress which reflects life in that it has no prospect of completion. (Tartaglia 2016: 181)

We now reach the point where we can make sense of what I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. I said that philosophy is an activity practiced through, and throughout, each of our lives. This is because, as Tartaglia suggests, philosophical progress consists in deepening our understanding of the world and ourselves through continuous exercise of the human ‘privilege’, *i.e.*, our transcending nature. When we engage ourselves in a ‘first-order’ philosophical inquiry, there are always open possibilities in which we might transcend its framework. True, we would plausibly have some ‘natural’ limitation on the range of humanly possible transcendence. But, we do not know where the boundary is. For us, therefore, philosophical progress has no end.

To sum up, our transcending nature, which even philosophers sometimes ignore or disrespect, makes our practice of philosophy never-ending. Finding a definitive answer to a question would, therefore, not be any genuine part of our philosophical journey. This point applies also to philosophy of free will. A straightforward answer to the naïve question “Are we free or not?” is not a thing that philosophers of free will ought to pursue. What should we aim at, then, in philosophy of free will? I would like to answer this in the remaining sections.

### 3.

The compatibilists typically suggest that human freedom is conceivable in the framework of physicalism or naturalism. For them, our freedom of will would be an immanent phenomenon within the system of mechanistic nature, as it were. Some libertarians oppose them by suggesting that proper free will must be ‘thicker’ than it. They therefore assume that there are transcending dynamics, or “agent causation”, in the objective reality. Another type of libertarian, by contrast, equates human freedom just with a kind of indeterministic event and suggests that some type of naturalism, insofar as it accommodates indeterminism, would be compatible with the existence of freedom of the libertarian sort. Most free will skeptics suppose that our genuine freedom is of

the ‘thick’ type, and argue that free will in this sense is not realizable in the objective world.

This status quo of the free will debate can be analyzed from a different perspective in terms of the terms ‘transcendence’, ‘objectification’ and ‘negation’. If the fundamental kind of human freedom consists in the movement of transcendence of our thinking and experience (as I believe), then, *e.g.*, the ‘agent-causal’ libertarians are guilty of objectifying such transcendent dynamism within their this-worldly causal connections. For dynamics of transcendence would essentially evade the net of our objectification, or *Vor-sich-stellen*. On the other hand, the typical compatibilists and naturalistic libertarians attempt to conceive human freedom in the framework of physical events and thereby overlook, or in some cases negate, the phenomenon of transcendence. The free will skeptics should be blamed for the same reason, because they would in most cases be devoted just to exposing the non-existence of free will in the objective world, and therefore have no respect for the ‘transcendent’ existence of our freedom.

We should remark that almost all the participants in the contemporary free-will debate ignore, or fail to rightly conceive, or even consciously deny, the possibility of human transcendence. They begin their consideration with the supposition that there is a fixed objective reality, and never consider whether or not we could step back from that given framework and relativize it, as explained in the following manner.

The pro-freedom debaters would, in fact, just seek what they define as human freedom in their particular, ‘prejudiced’ conception of the world. Robert Kane, an eminent libertarian, *e.g.*, starts his investigation by accepting a naturalistic worldview and analyzes our free choices in terms of indeterministic informational-processing of “the two crossing neural networks” in our brain, *i.e.*, so-called “parallel processing” (Kane 1999: 312), without critically reflecting whether his conception of the world could be transcended or not. What is problematic about his stance is, I would suggest, that his concern is exclusively focused on locating or constructing something he would call “freedom” within his presupposed framework. So, we would find in the process of his thinking, no moment of fundamental reflection on the necessity of his particular orientation, *i.e.*, of pursuing freedom in the event-causal world. In brief, Kane is, in other words, immersed in his presupposed framework and never re-examines it. He, as a result of this, fails to turn his eyes on the genuine dimension of human

freedom, *i.e.*, ‘transcendent’ liberation from the given framework of thinking and living (similar things happen in the work of, *e.g.*, Chisholm and Pereboom, to whom I refer in the following).

As another illustration, Roderick Chisholm, an equally eminent but non-naturalistic libertarian, suggests that “the motion of the hand was caused by the motion of certain muscles,” and “the motion of the muscles was caused by certain events that took place within the brain,” but “some event, and presumably one of those that took place within the brain, was caused by the agent and not by any other event” (Chisholm 1964: 31). He here objectifies human freedom of a ‘transcendent’ kind, *i.e.*, agent causation, within the sublunary causal connection, without asking at all whether our genuine freedom is transcendent over, or immanent in, the objective reality. If there is something absurd about his move, it is explained by Thomas Nagel’s comment that Chisholm would “try to force autonomy into the objective causal order” (Nagel 1986: 115). *I.e.*, if our genuine autonomy belongs not to the objective, or objectified, order, but rather to our transcendent objectification of the order in question, then any attempt at forcing autonomy into something objectified should be judged ‘absurd’; because it is meant to objectify something unobjectifiable.

The anti-freedom debaters could also, in most cases, be blamed for failing to rightly capture the genuine dimension of human freedom, for they just aim at showing the non-existence of freedom of will within the physical world. They would not consider the freedom in our transcending dynamism, *i.e.*, transcendental liberation as it were, which would enable us to step back from a given framework. Pereboom, *e.g.*, argues that, given our knowledge of natural science, agent-causal libertarianism is implausible. He says,

it may turn out that some human neural structures differ significantly from anything else in nature we understand, and that they serve to ground agent causation. This approach may be the best one for libertarians to pursue. But at this point we have no evidence that it will turn out to be correct. (Pereboom 2007: 114)

True, we can agree that we have no evidence for the prospect that physics, physiology, or neuroscience will discover the existence of agent causation, even in the remote future. But, we should remark at the same time, that Pereboom



would uncritically accept that human freedom should be found, if possible, somewhere in the objective worldview described by natural science. What is problematic here is, briefly, that the dimension of human transcendence remains completely out of his sight.

Kane, Chisholm, Pereboom, and most of the other debaters, suppose that there *exists* an objective reality, but never take into consideration our transcendence of objectification. It is, however, this ‘naïve’ realism, *i.e.*, the supposition that there is one fixed reality, that I would suggest is the root, or at least one of the essential roots, of the dialectic deadlock in the recent debate as introduced in Section 1. For, if there were one fixed reality, independent of our objectification and conceptualization, then there would have to be one true answer to the question “Are we free or not?” Adequate observation of this reality would tell us the Truth of human freedom. Realism uncritically presupposed in the free-will debate thus entails the ‘harmful’ supposition that the free-will question has one determinate answer.<sup>3</sup>

Why is this harmful, however? It is because, if it is assumed that there is this one Reality, then the difference between the core suggestions of libertarianism, compatibilism and free will skepticism would turn into an opposition or conflict concerning who knows the Truth. What each participant in the debate aims at would be, in consequence, to show that only her or his view is true. She or he would therefore try to find faults in the other camp’s position, but not to understand the good aspects of it. Thus, one speaks and the others just shake their heads in disbelief, as Double said. As a result of this, we have dialectical deadlock. How can we transcend this ‘suffocating’ situation?

My answer to this question is that we should keep in mind, and continuously reflect on, our transcending nature. Realizing the dimension of human transcendence, indeed, enables us to truly say that philosophical progress consists in deepening our understanding of the world and ourselves through the continuous exercise of transcendence, as I developed in Section 2 by following Tartaglia. Our philosophical dialogue, thus, essentially has no end and therefore never falls into a deadlock.

Transcendence would, generally speaking, enable us to keep away from a fixed framework of thinking and thereby to make sense of a certain ‘inconsistent’ view in a ‘rational’ way. It would, *e.g.*, tell us that there is

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<sup>3</sup> Only a few exceptional philosophers, some of whom are referred to in footnote 1 of this paper, avoid the naïve realism of the contemporary free-will debate.

something true, and something false, on both sides of the pro-freedom and anti-freedom camps. We would therefore have no need to answer which of libertarianism, compatibilism and free will skepticism is True. We should rather, *e.g.*, consider in what sense each of those views are true and false. I will explain these points in the next, final section. The discourse developed in the following is intended as an exercise in transcending the dead ends of the debate. Though possibly presumptuous, this entails positing a novel dimension for talking about human freedom. I begin my argument by objectifying the framework of the debate in a somewhat novel way.

#### 4.

The problem of free will, as transcendent reflection reveals it, can be formulated as a conflict between two types of perspective, which would make us see the world and ourselves in completely different ways. From one perspective, *i.e.*, the ‘daily’ perspective as it were, we see human behavior as action and say that, *e.g.*, Mr. A was driven by jealousy and shot Mr. B. Note that, from this perspective, we conceive Mr. A’s behavior of shooting as his action. And, insofar as we do so, we regard it as a freely chosen and responsible act.

From the other perspective, *i.e.*, the scientific perspective, however, we see human behavior as an event or mere happening and say, *e.g.*, that Mr. A’s brain state was such-and-such, the neural firing of such-and-such pattern occurred, and then the muscle contraction of such-and-such pattern occurred, with the result that the position of the trigger changed, and so forth. We now conceive Mr. A’s behavior not as his action (since, from the latter perspective, Mr. A is not an agent at all but just a complex sum of physical matter, and therefore Mr. A’s behavior is just a combination of physical movements). We rather see it as purely ‘impersonal’ event and, insofar as we do so, we regard it as non-free and non-responsible.<sup>4</sup>

The existence of two types of perspective, and therefore two ways to describe the world, leads to the following questions. From which of those perspectives should we see human behavior? In which way should we describe it? Suppose that a person, say Ms. C, chooses to take the scientific perspective and says that Mr. A’s behavior is just an event and so he is not responsible for

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<sup>4</sup> I would define “free will” here by a volitional factor in virtue of which a human being is qualified as an agent. Freedom in this sense would have no essential relationship with alternative possibilities.

Mr. B's death. She must be right in some sense, because there is, in fact, a perspective from which to see the world in that way. True, there is another perspective, *i.e.*, the daily perspective, to see the world as involving agency. But, it can be supposed that Ms. C knows it and yet chooses the 'impersonal' one. Given this supposition, telling Ms. C that there is another viewpoint would not change her idea. Her view that Mr. A's behavior, or more generally, human behavior in general, is not free would thus carry with it some legitimacy.

Is it the case, however, that each of two ways to describe the world is true in its own terms? Should we admit here a kind of relativism which suggests that it would be a waste of time to pursue some fruitful dialogue between these two ways of discourse? Can we, in the present context, do something more than telling Ms. C that there is another viewpoint, in order to argue for our agency and freedom?

My answer, which I am going to explain, is that we can. Certainly, this would not imply the ability to convert Ms. C to the pro-freedom school. But, it would add a dialectical depth to the present situation, as it were.

Let me rephrase our question, to begin with. The existence of two ways to describe the world brings about the question "Which should we choose?" as explained above. Which, then, should we choose between an action narrative and an event narrative, as it were? Should we see the world as the space of happening and say that our behavior is not free? Or, should we see the world as involving agency and ascribe freedom and responsibility to some of our behavior?

I argue that choosing one way to see the world and to describe it, in response to this question, is also an action. Selection is an action. It is, in other words, not just anything happening in the space of events but rather something an agent does. When trying to choose an answer to the question of "Which should we choose?" therefore, we are already inside the space of action. We then pragmatically presuppose that we are agents and can choose our own lives.

Even if a person takes the scientific perspective and describes human behavior as an event or happening, as Ms. C did about Mr. A's behavior, that person's act of describing nevertheless figures among human actions. More fundamentally, insofar as we are "*homines narrantes*," *i.e.*, story-telling human beings, we always live within the space of actions. As a result of this, to say "Everything is mere event, so there is no action at all" would be inevitably absurd in an important sense, for a person's saying so implies putting out of

view the fact that she or he *says* so (this is an action!).

The same thing applies to freedom. Should we describe human behavior as freely chosen? Or, should we view it as a matter of happening? Choosing one among these ways of discourse cannot but be an exercise of freedom. Generally speaking, when we choose something, we are already inside the space of freedom, as it were, for otherwise we would not be genuine subjects of the choice. As a result of this, to say “we are just composites of micro-physical movements, so there are no free agents who are truly subjects of behavior” would again be absurd. A person’s saying that, in fact, implies the so-called ‘self-destructive’ negation of his or her own freely choosing to say so.<sup>5</sup>

It turns out therefore that we can save the space of actions and freedom at the ultimate level. In fact, at the very time when we ask “Are we free agents or mere composites of events?” we find ourselves in the space of freedom. Our asking something is also among human actions. Our question “Are we free?” should, therefore, be affirmatively answered at the very time of its being questioned. The existence of human freedom is thus saved at the fundamental level.

This is what I would like to say when I reply to a person like Ms. C, who says, “Our behavior is never free.” What I intend by saying so, however, is not that Mr. A’s behavior of shooting must be a free action. Rather, I intend to remark that, independently of what Ms. C says about the behavior in question, we anyway cannot say, *e.g.*, “There is no free action at all,” unless we would fall into absurdity. I would suggest further that, if someone asserts that everything just happens in accordance with the laws of nature, then her or his statement would be self-destructive in an important sense. If, in fact, such a statement were true, then her or his assertion would be a mere happening, and therefore it would not be any action which could sensibly be ascribed accountability. Likewise, her or his saying so would be the same sort of noise. I would thus suggest that the ‘assertion’ in question has an absurd implication like “Treat this claim just as a natural phenomenon, like noise!”

Certainly, in response to these suggestions, someone might continue to say, *e.g.*, “It is exactly the case: I admit that what my assertion implies, and everything, including this claim, is just a happening.” I should say here that I have nothing to say in reply to him or her. What I have said in the last paragraph,

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<sup>5</sup> This is so, at least insofar as ‘freedom’ here is understood as a factor in virtue of which a human being is qualified as an agent, as remarked in the last note.

however, would justify this resignation. We would have no duty to reply to his or her voice if it was just a mere noise as he or she ‘suggests’.

To sum up, we cannot live outside the space of actions and freedom, insofar as we are *homines narrantes* or *res cogitantes* (since thinking is also an action in a broad sense). In this sense, nobody can consistently suggest that there is no free action. So, there must be something true about the pro-freedom camp in the free-will debate. The point can be explained or enlarged in terms of the concept of transcendence. Even if we try to talk about everything as mere happening, there remains some residue which keeps its bearing over our event narrative. *I.e.*, our fundamental freedom, as exercised in our talking, will not be captured as something unfree, as objectified in the event narrative. In this sense, our freedom of the ‘deepest’ kind is transcendent and therefore it does not belong to the objective causal order; and this is what Tartaglia’s transcendent hypothesis says about conscious experience.

We have thus *dis-covered* that the space of free actions is never closed so long as we live. We should remark, however, that a truth sometimes covers up another truth. The truth found in the last paragraphs, *i.e.*, the truth that we cannot view everything as mere happening, would, in fact, conceal the antipodal truth that human behavior must be just an event. This truth, I will argue, we cannot express in a straightforward way. In fact, as I already explained, if we say that all of our behavior is mere happening, then we immediately fall into absurdity. This is one of the main reasons why free will skepticism, which suggests that we have no freedom of will, sounds inconsistent. There is, however, something true about the radical denial of human freedom, as I will explain in the following.

Why should we believe that human beings are unfree? It is because we are not, *e.g.*, infinite gods, *i.e.*, exercisers of absolute freedom, but rather just finite individuals that belong to the natural world. True, there is a good sense in which it can be said that human beings participate of ‘divine’ ability. *E.g.*, understanding the meaning of something is a sort of ‘divine’ art, insofar as mere animals could not do it. Transcendence, in short, makes us divine to some degree. Nonetheless, we are also just parts of the system of nature. Our behavior should therefore be one of the events in the global system of causal connection.

A human being is a part of nature. It cannot be, therefore, a subject of independent autonomy. If the word ‘substance’ is a word applied only to something independently autonomous, there is no human substance in the world. Human beings, metaphorically speaking, are parts of the flow of a big river. Our

behavior must be mere happening at least in this fundamental sense.

Nonetheless, as stressed earlier, the fundamental eventhood of human behavior is hard to talk about. This is so, even if it is obvious that our behavior cannot but be an event as a part of the order of nature, because, to repeat the reason, *saying* that there is no action would imply absurdity. Our question is thus the following. How can we consistently talk about the fundamental eventhood of our behavior? Or, in other words, what should we say in order to understand why we, who already found that human behavior is necessarily free at the ultimate level, can admit that our behavior is fundamentally unfree? How can we understand this contradiction?

My central suggestion is that the fundamental eventhood of our behavior cannot be endorsed by us in any direct, or straightforward, way. Its endorsement rather requires some medium. If you reflect on the history of thought, you would realize that many profound thinkers reached endorsement of the fundamental eventhood of our behavior through various paths of mediation (in a more or less Hegelian sense). Medieval philosophers or theologians, *e.g.*, contemplated God and found His freedom in divine decision to be of the ideal kind. For them, only God is truly qualified as free. Human decisions, on the contrary, are just free in a very limited, ‘incomplete’ way. Our freedom to make them is a mere shadow of the Idea of Divine Freedom, so to speak. Human beings are not masters of their own action, but their behavior is a result of God’s choice. In this sense, our behavior is not what we do, but something properly called “happening” as a remote effect of *causa prima*.

Contemplation of the divine perfection, nonetheless, is not demanded as a necessary condition for recognizing the eventhood of our behavior. What is required would rather be realization of our own finite nature. And, in order to be aware of our finitude, it would be necessary to transcend our own sphere and relativize it through mediation with something beyond us. Here is the reason why the eventhood in question cannot be conceived in a ‘direct’ way. Endorsement of it would require self-transcendence, and relativization through mediation with something beyond us would open a perspective on which we could conceive ourselves as unfree.

I suggest that scientific reflection on the world also would tell us of the limitation of our mastery, as theological contemplation informs us of our imperfection of agency. If we view ourselves, *e.g.*, from a physical point of view, we conceive human behavior, not as a process of self-determination and

self-control, but rather as a consequence of some universal laws. From such a scientific perspective, human beings could not renew the world by their action, but rather they would just be subjected to the universal laws which govern the world. More precisely, the scientific point of view would pull human beings back into the dimension in which the distinctions of master/slave, free/constraint, and so on, would no longer make sense, because there is no room for action within the space of events opened by the ‘cool’ perspective in question.

Let me summarize. When we talk about something, we live within the space of action, as I stressed above (since to talk is an action). The space of actions is, therefore, the ultimate field of human life in which we continuously find ourselves. We human beings, however, are not necessarily immersed in this space. We can transcend it, while we are still always within it. We can, in fact, step back from our own absolute perspective and relativize it through mediation with something beyond us (*e.g.*, God and natural law). We would, in this way, find that our behavior is just mere happening of which we have no ultimate control. There must be therefore something true about the anti-freedom camps in the free-will debate.

We should remark that, insofar as the pro-freedom and anti-freedom camps both suggest something true, the philosophers of free will ought not to seek a straightforward answer to the question of “Are we free or not?” The right track would be, I suggest, to keep away from this naïve question.

Someone might be afraid, however, that there would remain nothing for us to do in philosophy of free will if we stopped asking whether or not we are free. I would suggest that there remain many things. We can, *e.g.*, try to make explicit under what framework of thought we engage ourselves in in our first-order practice of philosophy, as Tartaglia did in his book and I did in this paper. Our transcending nature would leave us many things to do in order to deepen our understanding of the world and ourselves. In this sense, I said above that philosophy is an activity practiced through, and throughout, each of our lives. Concretely speaking, each of the three main camps in the free-will debate, libertarianism, compatibilism, and free will skepticism, must have its unconsidered framework of investigation. To explicate what it is might be, I suggest, among what we should aim at. This attempt might, as I hope it will, break the dialectical dead end we now face in philosophy of free will.

I will finish my paper with a brief critical comment on one of Tartaglia’s

suggestions in his book. I completely sympathize with his conception of philosophy as an activity practiced through, and throughout, each of our lives, if I correctly understand him. I would therefore argue that Tartaglia could affirm life's meaning in a deepened sense as it were, because he should find some 'meaning' in our engagement in such perennial philosophical conversation. True, he is right in suggesting that any social meaning could be transcended and therefore it should not be a final aim which would give our life an overall point. I remark that his suggestion of this point is very significant because it would make us realize the transcendent dimension of our thinking about meaning. However, I would note that Tartaglia unnecessarily emphasizes the meaninglessness of our life to an excessive degree, because his discourse seems at least to me to imply that there is a deeper dimension of meaning of life than the ordinary, social one. Tartaglia says, e.g.,

[t]here would still be plenty of philosophy to do, of course, because there are many routes to transcendence to explore; some of which have doubtless yet to be discovered. And there is endless potential for investigating the nature and scope of our misrepresentation of transcendent being [...]. The task could not end, because every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own. (Tartaglia 2016: 181)

I would argue that, if such a philosophical journey is worth making, then a life including it would be meaningful *in some sense*. I can agree with Tartaglia that, insofar as any social meaning could be relativized, our life could not be 'meaningful' in the sense that some social framework would supply it with an overall purpose. I should admit that our life cannot but be like a drifting ship with no destination. I would nevertheless argue that, insofar as, e.g., "every new generation *needs* to make philosophical ideas their own," such activities should have some meaning in another sense, though what this sense would be, I suggest, is among the hard questions appearing in our perennial philosophical journey. Deepening our understanding of life's meaning that we cannot but admit at some level would belong to the intellectual activity authentically called the 'philosophy of meaning of life'.



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## Reply to Sho Yamaguchi

James Tartaglia\*

I know exactly what Sho Yamaguchi means about certain debates in philosophy, where the lines of opposition are so trenchantly drawn, and the incredulity each side shows to the other is so intense and completely intransigent, that the spectacle of it seems, frankly, bizarre. Something, common sense dictates, must surely be wrong. One such exchange, which struck me hard when I was a student, took place between Daniel Dennett and John Searle (printed in Searle 1997, thereby allowing Searle to have the last word ... or was it rather Dennett, by not considering the correspondence worthy of appearing in a publication under his name?) Dennett and Searle are probably the two most eminent philosophers of mind in the world today. But on the face of it – in the sense, that is, of what we would naturally conclude from equivalent evidence within any other area of life – each thinks the other a fool. In this exchange, Searle basically says that denying the existence of conscious experiences, such as pains, is the most stupid thing any philosopher could ever say; and that Dennett says it. While Dennett basically says that relying on outdated intuitions, while ignoring all the scientific evidence which shows that these intuitions are mistaken is ... the most stupid thing any philosopher could ever do; and that Searle does it. What is a student, who finds the views of both philosophers interesting, supposed to make of such a spectacle?

Imagine taking your car to a garage, where one mechanic informs you that the problem is obviously with the gearbox; no question about it. Then another mechanic strides up, with a look of disbelief on his face, and tells you that it is obviously nothing to do with the gearbox: the problem is with the carburettor. They then both proceed to go at each other's throats. And just to add to the absurdity, suppose you later discover that these are the two most eminent car mechanics in the world! Surely one of them must simply be wrong. That was my immediate reaction when I encountered the Dennett / Searle exchange, and realised that its contours were to be found across philosophy's debates; albeit rarely so sharply defined. I remember telling my supervisor that I thought the

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problem was time and patience: they were giving up too easily. It seemed to me that whenever philosophical debates reached a crux of apparent irreconcilability, the participants became frustrated and quit, thereby leaving us onlookers none the wiser. So just lock Dennett and Searle in a room, I said, with lots of pieces of paper so they can map out their various steps, and refuse to let them out until they reach agreement; a psychologist could run tests to make sure they were not faking it. Then, assuming they deserve their reputations, we would have the answer. I gave up on this idea long ago. I think only one of them would ever leave the room (my guess: Searle). It was a naïve conception of philosophy; albeit one which remains popular among those who would formalise, and even computerise, all philosophical debates. *Something* must be wrong when these debacles occur, and not just *someone*.

Yamaguchi has an account of what is going wrong, and I find it highly gratifying that it takes inspiration from my book. The idea which captured his imagination is that of stepping back from the framework of daily life, in which our purposes are presupposed, to consider them in a broader perspective from which nihilism can come into view. Yamaguchi then connected this, quite rightly, with my concern throughout the book to reconnect the traditional problems of philosophy with matters of natural human interest. Philosophy has become insular in the shadow of scientistic culture. Add to this the fact that its traditional problems have exceedingly long histories, and the result has been the isolation of philosophical problems from the natural human interest that sparked them off in the first place, leaving them of interest to professionals only. Too often, nobody much remembers why their topic was ever supposed to be interesting, and nobody much cares so long as writing about it allows them to publish. When philosophers address these issues in their ‘research papers’ – which is the misnomer scientistic culture has landed our discipline with – I get the distinct impression that the question of why they are doing so is rarely at the forefront of their minds. They usually find the topic of personal interest, I think; although I have heard more than one successful philosopher tell me that they do not find their specialist topic interesting – it originally secured their professional niche, so they had to continue writing about it to maintain their reputation and publication output. Too often, the aim when writing a paper you intend to submit to a journal (and I have been there), is to prove you know what you are talking about, make a point that has not been made before – within the options provided by the recent literature – and thereby secure yourself a publication: in order to build your career as a philosopher.

Saying something that might be of interest to people generally, rather than simply to people who might cite your paper within their own paper, is too rarely on the agenda.

This blinkered approach works fine in many areas of life. I tend to prefer the work of artists who do not much care what the public wants to see or hear, but rather look to what their peers are doing, and try to come up with something as good or better. This produces good art, and the public tends to latch onto good art; and even if they do not, it does not devalue the artist's endeavour. But I do not think such an approach is conducive to good philosophy, even though it does regularly appear through the cracks; moreover the public will never latch onto it; and I think it does indeed tend to devalue the endeavour – since ways of philosophically understanding the world, rooted in the history of how humans have thought about these matters, and directed to our current concerns, are not thereby produced. What is produced is a myriad of different jigsaw pieces, most of which do not connect; some subsets of the pieces do, of course, but the task of putting them together has become peripheral to the main task of producing more and more pieces. All you need do is find flaws in recently produced pieces, and Hey Presto: you have produced a new piece. Piece-production has eclipsed puzzling within the closed doors of today's academy.

In light of this situation, combined with my concerns about the decline in the cultural status of philosophy – which scientistic culture is trying to capitalise upon with all its might – I advocated stepping back from the professional framework of 'what the players in the debate are saying at the moment,' to the much wider framework of life. I advocated thinking about why anyone ever cared about the topic in question, why anyone might still care about it, and why you, the philosopher, do. Yamaguchi says that, 'This ability to step back from a given framework Tartaglia calls "transcendence"' (pp. 288-9). Well, what I predominantly mean by 'transcendence' in *Meaningless* relates to my view that consciousness provides a context from within which we conceptualise the world, but that reality itself is 'transcendent', in the sense that its nature transcends such conceptualisations; except for the minimally contentful ones we use to metaphysically point to it. Nevertheless, I am all for creative readings of my work, and we certainly do 'transcend' frameworks in thought when we look to a wider framework from within which the goals that previously absorbed us to the exclusion of all else now take on a new significance. Metaphysics is the ultimate transcendence, in this sense. So Yamaguchi's terminology is fine by me.

Yamaguchi goes on – again in a manner I thoroughly approve of – to connect this view that philosophy needs to transcend its insular concerns to consider them within the sphere of a wider framework, with my distinction between ontology and enframement. Thus philosophy can benefit from framing its interest in ontological matters, such as the nature of consciousness or time, within a context which reveals the wider interest of the matter. As he puts it, ‘Answering the question of enframement of an ontological inquiry would justify the whole philosophical project at a deeper level’, and he memorably characterises this approach as ‘two-wheeled’ (p. 291).

He connects this ‘two-wheeled’ approach with discussions, in Chapters 3 and 8, where I say that the diversity of opinions to be found in philosophy only seems like a weakness if we make an inappropriate comparison to the kind of consensus that can be found in science or mathematics. For when we grasp what philosophy is really up to, we should not be expecting definitive, final answers. If everyone agreed with *The Book of Philosophical Answers*, there would no longer be any philosophy in the world, just a list of dead facts (or rather, a list of what these unrealistically unphilosophical people regarded as facts). Similarly, if all painters tried to mimic the style of Chagall as closely as possible, then the art of painting would be pretty much dead – completely dead if they simply reproduced his originals. And if everyone agreed about the causes of World War I, then that topic would no longer be a live one for historians. Connecting all these ideas up in his own original way, then, Yamaguchi reaches the view that by continually transcending philosophical debates – to frame them within a wider context determined by the concerns of the day which the philosopher finds his- or herself living among – philosophy becomes a never-ending practice. ‘Finding a definitive answer to a question would, therefore, not be any genuine part of our philosophical journey.’ (p. 293)

I have sympathy for this position, but I think it goes a little too far. All I would say, and did say in *Meaningless*, is that it seems exceptionally unlikely, in light of the history and nature of philosophy, that we will ever find definitive answers to the traditional problems of philosophy which everyone can agree on; after all, there is disagreement in philosophy even over matters such as the Law of Non-Contradiction. However I also do not think this is something to worry about. In philosophy, we cannot simply work within the confines of objective thought, which sets up strict criteria for accurate representation, since the status of the world objective thought describes is itself a paradigmatically philosophical issue.

The history of philosophy provides us with a variety of competing representational systems with which to attempt to describe reality in this wider context, via investigation of the various phenomena which resist incorporation into objective thought and thereby indicate the presence of a wider context. In such an endeavour, objective thought cannot settle matters on its own; even the physicalist who wants it to, will still have to portray the objective world as the final context, thereby stepping outside of objective thought and into philosophy. Moreover, given the variety of competing representational systems that have been developed – none of which are required by objective thought, otherwise the problems they seek to address would never have arisen – there are no universally accepted definitions from which a definitive answer might be derived *a priori*. As such, continuing disagreement is practically inevitable. But this is no bad thing, because it prevents objective thought from closing in on itself, and thereby keeps the world philosophical.

I would not say that a definitive answer would ‘not be any genuine part of our philosophical journey’, then, only that we should not see lack of consensus as a problem, but rather a facet of philosophy. We have to look for definitive answers, and I think it would be great if there could be consensus around an answer which affirmed, in some essential way, the transcendent nature of our reality. I would love for everyone to agree on that, primarily because the world would thereby become a more philosophical place again; intransigent oppositions would still proliferate, of course, but the prospect we currently face of objective thought closing in on itself would have become a distant memory – a laughable one, I should have thought, were everyone to come to agree on this, as a new kind of background common sense. If I find solutions I am happy with, then I do not see anything wrong with promoting them as the answers which should be accepted as definitive. Anything else would seem rather wishy-washy. For although I think philosophy has an affinity with art, in that it has developed a variety of schools of representation, and aesthetic and emotional effects belong within its remit, it must always be a representational ‘art’. The idea of a purely abstract philosophy makes no sense to me. If there is a transcendent context of meaning, then I am wrong about nihilism, and that is that; regardless of whether there is any way I could ever possibly know this. You might be wrong in philosophy – but you cannot really be wrong in art. You are extremely unlikely to be right if you think you are better than Picasso; but your paintings will not be wrong.

Yamaguchi’s position is rather stronger than mine, then, in that he thinks the

idea of a definitive answer is a mistake to be shunned; whereas I, mindful of the quotation from Kołakowski with which I opened Chapter 8 (PML, p. 169), think that such an answer has to be your aim when you enter into metaphysical inquiry. Yamaguchi has extended my views in his own direction, which is a good thing; it is what you should always try to do with philosophical ideas, if you can. This is not to deny, of course, that there remains a very close affinity. After all, even though I would be glad if some position on the transcendence of reality were to become definitive, I would still expect it to be continually ‘transcended’, in Yamaguchi’s sense, in the hands of each new creative philosopher. And I am always looking for opportunities to ‘transcend’ my own positions with new resonances. However, it is the extra strength of his position, according to which we should not even be seeking a definitive answer, and thereby should not be arguing that others have it wrong, which provides his solution to the puzzle of intransigence with which I opened this reply. I stand by my conviction that something must be wrong when philosophy can produce spectacular standoffs like the one between Searle and Dennett. So let us see how Yamaguchi’s solution fares in explaining what it is.

Yamaguchi illustrates his solution against the backdrop of the free will debate. I shall be rather cagey as regards the content of this debate, because in the sequel to *Meaningless* which I am currently working on, free will is one of the traditional topics I will address, along with personal identity and truth; just as in the original I addressed consciousness, time and universals. Since I have yet to get into the fine detail of my account of freedom, however, I want to avoid saying something I might later regret. So I shall leave free will as an example, and focus on the metaphilosophy.

He gets to the crux of the matter in the following passage:

if there were one fixed reality, independent of our objectification and conceptualization, then there would have to be one true answer to the question “Are we free or not?” Adequate observation of this reality would tell us the Truth of human freedom. Realism uncritically presupposed in the free-will debate thus entails the ‘harmful’ supposition that the free-will question has one determinate answer.

Why is this harmful, however? It is because, if it is assumed that there is this one Reality, then the difference between the core suggestions of libertarianism, compatibilism and free will skepticism would turn into an

opposition or conflict concerning who knows the Truth. What each participant in the debate aims at would be, in consequence, to show that only her or his view is true. She or he would therefore try to find faults in the other camp's position, but not to understand the good aspects of it. Thus, one speaks and the others just shake their heads in disbelief, .... (p. 296).

The solution, then, is to reject the assumption that there is one, fixed and determinate reality from which we are trying to discover the answer as to whether we are free or not. Reality is transcendent so will not yield such answers. Rather, we make philosophical progress through the deepening of understanding we achieve by looking for the truth in all the three main positions in the debate: compatibilism, libertarianism and free will scepticism. We look for the 'good aspects' of each, and thereby avoid the kind of standoff that arises when we assume that one must be wholly right and the other two wholly wrong. We transcend the terms of the debate, frame it within the context of our personal journey of philosophical discovery, and see what we can take from all sides.

I find this an appealing vision, and following it through would indeed seem to avoid any potential for unproductive impasses, of the kind which can place our discipline in a most unattractive light. However, once we get into the detail of what Yamaguchi thinks he can take from the various sides of the debate, doubts start forming in my mind. From the side that affirm freedom (the compatibilists and libertarians), Yamaguchi takes the following insight. Whenever we take a stance on the free will issue, he thinks, whether by looking at our actions as physical, causally determined events, and hence not as freely chosen and self-determined, or else when we look at our actions *as* actions, as we do within the framework of daily life, and hence as freely chosen actions originating in our decisions to work towards certain goals, then whichever way we decide to look at it, we are *deciding, choosing, acting*. 'Selection is an action', as he puts it (p. 298). In my terms, we might say that philosophy, like any of our other activities, takes place in the framework, even though it sometimes requires us to disengage from the framework in thought.

The action of transcending our framework of actions in order to see them as causally determined movements partially undermines the free will sceptic's position, in Yamaguchi's view, thereby rendering it 'absurd' (p. 299). For then the sceptic is saying, as a freely-chosen action, meant to be interpreted as such (they want us to choose to embrace their position rather than any other) that the sound



passing the barrier of their teeth is just ‘mere noise’ (p. 300). They are asserting that they are not making an assertion. If we take them at their word, we have no position to respond to; but the very fact of taking them at their word gives us all the reason we need to reject their position.

However, this only partially undermines their view, for Yamaguchi also thinks there is a sound insight to be taken from free will scepticism. For we can indeed transcend our ordinary framework in which action and purpose is presupposed, in order to view ourselves from the wider perspective of the physical universe. As he puts it, ‘We can, in fact, step back from our own absolute perspective and relativize it through mediation with something beyond us (*e.g.*, God and natural law). We would, in this way, find that our behavior is just mere happening of which we have no ultimate control’ (p. 302). We thereby show recognition of our finitude by relativizing our lives within the framework, to something larger. So both the free will and anti-free will sides of the debate are onto something, and by recognising our ability to transcend our situation in thought, we can take the good aspects of both in order to weave them into our own personal philosophical journeys, without feeling the need to stand our ground on one side or the other. The transcending ability shows we are free; what we discover when we exercise it in a certain way shows that we are not.

I find this account original, well-motivated and interesting; but as I said before, I have my doubts. Firstly, it seems to me that Yamaguchi is siding with the compatibilist, although officially he is not supposed to be taking sides. For if, as he says, ‘human behavior is necessarily free at the ultimate level’ (p. 301), given our transcending ability and the fact that exercising it always places our utterances in the space of reason and action, and yet he does not seek to deny the legitimacy of conceiving these same utterances as simply physical movements, then it seems to me that the free will sceptic must simply be wrong to think that free will is an illusion. It appears illusionary when we take up a certain stance towards the world, but at the ‘ultimate level’, it is always there, being exercised in the background. So free will and determinism are compatible. Moreover, the third side of the debate, libertarianism, receives very little concession within Yamaguchi’s account. It is right about the reality of free will; but then so is compatibilism, which does not make the mistake of thinking free will is incompatible with determinism – a mistake which places libertarianism on the misguided track of trying to insert a special kind of agent causation into the physical world. So it seems to me that Yamaguchi is saying that compatibilism is right, but that nevertheless there is

something right about free will scepticism (which the compatibilist recognises) and something right about libertarianism (which the compatibilist also recognises). This is somewhat conciliatory; but then, compatibilism, by its very nature, is a conciliatory position. He will still be faced with free will sceptics saying, ‘no, there is no free will at all’, and libertarians saying, ‘no, our physical perspective on the universe does not reveal any truth to free will scepticism’.

And secondly, I have my doubts about the potency of Yamaguchi’s central argument against the free will sceptic, namely that our ability to transcend the framework and take up a purely physical perspective undermines their position. For they can simply say that Yamaguchi’s ‘mere noise’ is a causal determinant of yet more ‘mere noise’: one person emits sounds, these sounds are processed in the brain of another, causing them to respond with yet more sounds, bodily movements, etc. They can say that although we naturally interpret these sounds as intentional speech acts, that is not what they really are, and the interpretation we place on them is simply another part of the causal network. Hence there is only really sound and movement, and the act of transcending the framework in thought is yet more of the same. I am not saying I agree with this, but nevertheless I think this is what they would say; and nothing in Yamaguchi’s account undermines it.

I very much like the aim of Yamaguchi’s account, then, namely that of steering our discipline towards a more tolerant, self-reflective and productive future, and I think he is working along the right lines (naturally enough, perhaps). I am just not sure he is quite there yet; but I look forward to his future development of these ideas. So what do I myself think was going on in the clash of the titans between Searle and Dennett? Essentially, what I said in *Meaningless* about the general root of philosophical standoffs on the transcendence-denying side.

Both Searle and Dennett think that consciousness needs to be incorporated into the scientific world-view of objective thought, but they have different tactics for pursuing this doomed and damaging project. Searle thinks the scientific world-view must be expanded to include subjective properties, while Dennett thinks the scientific world-view requires us to reject subjective properties. Philosophy-scepticism is more deeply ingrained in Dennett, which is why he hates Searle’s philosophical intuitions so much, but both are motivated by science-worship; the only reason Searle is happy with his philosophical intuitions is that he thinks a metaphysic dictated by science can incorporate them by simply saying that brain states causes subjective properties. Searle is more realistic, because when philosophers like Dennett are not breathing down scientists’ necks, they are

perfectly happy to say which of the brain states they are investigating cause which states of consciousness; it is the natural thing to say when you are not doing philosophy. The philosophical pyrotechnics Dennett engages in so as to make consciousness disappear are hardly likely to be embraced outside of philosophy. And yet Dennett has a better grasp of the philosophical situation, because consciousness does indeed need to be exiled to the realms of pure illusion if the metaphysics of physicalism is true.

The reason they find it so hard to stomach each other's positions is that in their minds, the scientific respectability of philosophy is at stake. The only future for philosophy, they both think, is one in which it walks hand-in-hand with science. As leaders of their profession, this raises the stakes considerably. Searle thinks that Dennett's denial of something as blatantly obvious as conscious experience will lead his discipline into disrepute and ultimate ruin; science is currently finding out more than ever before about consciousness, and if philosophy is seen to be denying its existence, it will be ridiculed and isolated. Dennett, on the other hand, thinks that Searle is making claims without scientific evidence, and that philosophy only has a future if it learns to track scientific discoveries at every turn, never deviating too far from them; common sense and philosophical reasoning must no longer seek to supplement, and can certainly never be allowed to conflict with, the hard evidence of the sciences; otherwise, once more, the discipline will fall into disrepute. Both have closed their minds to the notion of transcendence, and hence an absolutely central component of the history of their discipline, from which its future will unfold. Eradicate scientism and reassert philosophy's own identity, and their worries disappear in a puff of smoke. Philosophy will never have a future hanging onto the coattails of science. When its conflicting voices try to help science out, the result is the opposite of that intended; if philosophers were not so keen to get involved, I expect there would be a lot less philosophy-scepticism in popular science books.

Without the influence of scientism, I think they could probably see some good in each other's positions. At the very least, such intemperate exchanges would be less likely, because much less would be at stake: within a self-confident discipline eager to assert its independence, all that would be at stake is how best to philosophically describe consciousness, and although they would still reject each other's starting points, they might still find some useful insights transpiring further down the line; Dennett's reflections on the inaccuracy of introspective judgements, for instance, or Searle's account of the intentional structure of mind.

I have no doubt that standoffs would still occur, but if each side made more effort to understand the reasoning behind the other's curious starting point, so that it came to seem a little less curious; and if they no longer saw the starting point as a reason not to look further down the line to find out whether it issues in something that could profitably be incorporated into their own understanding; then these standoffs might be a little more productive. This might sound rich coming from me, given the polemical character of the appendix to the introduction to *Meaningless*. But: I did make considerable effort to understand the starting point of the meaning *in* life debate; the direction it heads thereafter falls outside of my interests in that book; I am still learning; and philosophy is not where it needs to be yet.

Yamaguchi ends his paper with the criticism that, 'Tartaglia unnecessarily emphasizes the meaninglessness of our life to an excessive degree, because his discourse seems at least to me to imply that there is a deeper dimension of meaning of life than the ordinary, social one' (p. 303). Well, I would have needed a different title if I had not, and besides, I think nihilism is a very big deal: it provides a legitimate secular answer to an unjustifiably maligned philosophical question which has deep personal resonance for us all. His reasoning is that, 'there is a deeper dimension of meaning of life than the ordinary, social one,' and that this is provided by undertaking a philosophical journey, which might include 'Deepening our understanding of life's meaning' (p. 303). This just strikes me as social meaning; which is no bad thing. Social meaning makes life worth living, and if philosophy is your particular thing, it can provide plenty of the good kind. Writing this reply gave me a buzz, and I hope it will do something similar for Yamaguchi and others. I see no good reason to try to elevate our buzzes over those of others, and I see no plausible way of doing so either. If philosophy is good, then others will latch on; always have, always will.

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